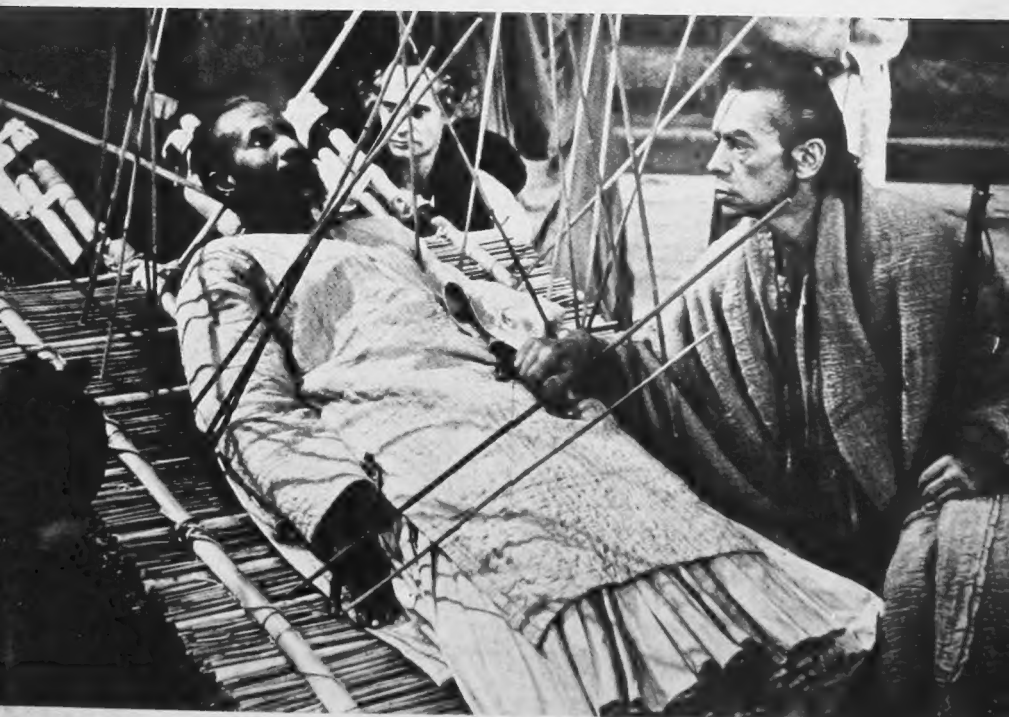


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Peter Brook's *Mahabharata* An Interview

Sunil Kothari

We are happy to print below an interview by Sunil Kothari on behalf of the *Quarterly Journal* with Peter Brook on his long-awaited version of the *Mahabharata* which opened to a rousing reception in July as part of the year-long Festival of India celebrations in France.

—Editor.

SK: You have been involved with this production for a long time. How and when did you first get interested in the *Mahabharata* (MB)?

PB: There were three dominant stages. The first stage was, when in 1967, I was doing a production with the Royal Shakespeare Theatre called *US* about the war in Vietnam. That was when I first encountered the *Bhagavad Gita* (BG), brought to me by a young Indian author who had come with a play that he had written. I was working on the meaning of this terrible war in Vietnam and the image of the warrior, who suddenly refuses to be carried by the tide of war and interrogates himself on the reason for fighting, seemed to me fundamental and, for a long time, I tried to introduce this into the Vietnam production. But, for many reasons, it could not find its place. Even so, it left me with the conviction that this particular situation transformed into a human and dramatic image—the warrior who stops in front of the line of soldiers in battle—was an image that had come from far away, it was an image for today. So, I could not lose this image.

Then, while I was doing *The Midsummer Night's Dream* (MND) at Stratford, I met with a company of Kathakali, which had come from India to Liverpool. Such is the surrealism of international cultural arrangements that, for no reasons that I could understand, the major Kathakali companies come from Kerala to Liverpool—not playing in London or anywhere else... maybe, they played in some small place. I could not understand why this had been arranged. In the middle of the rehearsals of the MND, I went to Liverpool to see this Kathakali show... I knew there was a connection between the BG and the MB, but the MB didn't mean anything to me. What interested me was the Kathakali performance. When I saw Bhima's killing of Duhshasana, I had an impression of a tremendous force. The impression that Kathakali made was something that went beyond the artistic, because of the authenticity of a powerful energy of a quality I had never seen before.

The next landmark was in 1974. At that time, I came back to the image of a soldier who says: 'Why do I fight?' It was an image that haunted me. One afternoon, I asked Jean-Claude Carriere, who had already started working as a sort of guru writer, to come and meet a great friend of ours, Philippe Lavastine, who is a Sanskrit scholar, a European who has devoted his entire life to studying Sanskrit and Indian literature. I had a feeling, maybe it was no more than an intuition, that behind this situation of the BG lay a play. I asked, 'Would you tell us a little more about what is the situation? Who is this character? Why

Arjuna? Who really is Arjuna? Why is Krishna driving Arjuna's chariot? Tell me this, because then we can see perhaps what dramatic material there is out of which we can, perhaps, make a play today."

His reply was very simple: "I can't explain to you why Krishna is driving Arjuna's chariot, without telling you of a scene which comes earlier. The scene is that Krishna is asleep and Arjuna and Duryodhana both come to Krishna. While he was explaining this scene, we put various questions: "Who is this Duryodhana? Why is he the enemy of Arjuna?" And so on and so forth. This went on for three months. To explain one thing, he had to explain something further until he had opened up to us orally the world of the *MB*. At the end of this, Carriere and I said to each other: "Here is something of such richness, of such importance and such universality that it is terrible to think that our ignorance is shared by the whole of the western world. The least that we can do is to try to find a form in which the west can receive what we have received over the past few months."

From then on, began a long process of research. We had to learn about the material in depth—to find out what translations of the *MB* existed... and so on. The only complete translation was in English and I had to subscribe to a bookshop near the British Museum in London, for one year, in order to get copies of it one by one. Eventually the work started. At the same time, we felt the necessity to touch the other side which the Kathakali show had opened. How does India see this material in its dramatic forms? Then started a series of journeys to India.

Our aim was not to try to project Indian forms in the west, because these I have seen. We had to find our own way of doing it, trying to understand the way that Indians themselves see it. And for that we had to know India, the Indian reality of today and the Indian reality of ancient times as reflected by the temples and traditions that are still alive today and the different manner—classical and popular—in which these themes are reflected in the great variety of Indian fine arts. All this led us to a very enormous and thrilling series of explorations so that we could start from a contact with the Indian way of life.

Simultaneously, we had to prepare the field here. So, eight years ago, we brought a Kathakali dancer for three months to work with our actors. Then a Kathakali company, which was here, spent three days at the Centre. They played for us and we played for them. We played *UBU* for the Kathakali dancers and they played it back to us in the Kathakali form.

A little digression here, to draw attention to the meaning of the International Centre for Theatre Creations. In 1968, for the very first time, I was invited to do a workshop in Paris. The experiment, new and interesting, was to bring people from different cultures and get them to work together, out of which grew the idea of a permanent centre—because I found the experience so rewarding. The Centre consists of people who have, on the face of it, no common language. Each is impregnated with a certain theatre style of his own. We have come together with the intensity that comes from people having a common aim. Each one opens up his language for the other and out of that a new language arises, which is coloured by the contribution of each and yet is more than a sum of their techniques. It is something new and something further. We had a similar experience at the Workshop in Bhopal three years ago. The aim of the International Centre is not to reform the world by theory but simply each person in his own area tries to make

something possible which is not possible on a national scale. The idea is to bring together people of very, very different backgrounds and because of this ourselves to become a mirror through which themes could be reflected that could not be reflected by a national group. This is not to run down a national group. Certain things, of national importance and local issues, can only be reflected by a national group.

We have seen for years now the tragedy of a transported culture. I have seen how in one day it is possible for something to leave its village to arrive in the capital city and be destroyed... The act of theatre is always an act with two legs—one leg is within the subject-matter and the other leg is within the audience who have to receive it... and for this reason there has to be transposition. Now the whole question is whether the transposition is done well or badly... The difficulty and the challenge of a subject demands a proportionate respect in propagation. All of us have been aware from the day we started that it is a tremendous responsibility to touch something which one can feel immediately is precious and treasured and loved by a whole continent. So we have to approach it in that way, whatever the result. People say—"This is your big work." Nonsense; It isn't my work. All I can say is that it is the biggest responsibility. So before doing it, we have to spend all this time... we tried out the first short version as a play eight years ago.

Then come in the purely practical aspects. This demands something that is going against theatre practice because theatre in the west, on the whole, is not based on continuity so that, normally, the whole strength and weakness of the theatre is that you have an idea and three months later it has taken form. This is very exciting. But, in a sense, production very rarely has a possibility of developing over a long period of time because it never has the security. No organisation has the continuity for doing it. So in establishing our own organisation here we could give ourselves the possibility of preparing something for over ten years. Even directors in national theatres are appointed for a period of three or five years, at a time, and then subject to a committee.

Then, we had to build up confidence: The French Government had to have the confidence in us to feel that we deserved to be supported. If we were just an experimental group doing works nobody wanted to see, the support would not have been coming. But, gradually, we reached the position where the French Government, and, in particular, Jack Lang, Minister of Culture—he asked me to come and see him. He asked me: "Have you a big project?" I replied: "Yes, I have a big project." Lang said: "I want you to know that we are entirely behind it." I told him what it was. From then, the French Government, at a time of an economic crisis, when it is very hard even for France, has stood behind us. The Minister of Culture has been absolutely firm; we had no idea then that there was going to be a Festival of India and here I see destiny... Two years ago, came the other great step in this direction—Pupul Jayakar spelt out the possibility of the Festival. They are two of our pillars—Pupul Jayakar and Jack Lang.

The Festival of India made it possible for us to get materials and objects in India, to send our musicians (Toshi and Kim Menzer) there. Toshi went around India for a year and Kim went to Madras and studied with a *nadaswaram* teacher. He is the only musician in Europe to play the instrument. In that way, elements were prepared.

For me, the other step was when I received a telegram asking me to conduct a Workshop in Bhopal. There I made personal contacts.

SK: You have visited India for this project and travelled throughout, meeting several people. In terms of incorporating some of the techniques of the traditional theatres, which are the other countries where the traditions of the *MB* are seen as a living tradition?

PB: We have, in our company, an actor from Bali, and this is very important because, in Bali, the *MB* is as living a tradition as it is in India. So, we first thought that we would really investigate the Japanese and the Kampuchean puppets on the *MB* and also the Javanese and Balinese... But, in fact, I have been very careful not to get befuddled with too many sources.

All the time, the theatre works through suggestion... we try to suggest the essence of something, that seems to me universally alike. For instance, in the whole of Indian theatrical arts, there seemed to be one element that seemed to be essential—the small curtain. It was so right and natural that we use it continually like in the death of Krishna. The only other place where I have made an allusion to a form—for it's not in reality, it's in a dream—is when Dhrishtadyumna appears to Ashwathama in a dream and he comes as a red figure.

SK: While directing on such a grand scale, how did the actors respond to the story and the impersonation of characters?

PB: What was interesting is that they work with a lot of Africans. They have a deep esteem and love for the depth of the African traditional culture which is very little understood but, in the west, at least is respected. There is respect for a high level of civilisation. This doesn't take a visible form... because, in the whole of the African continent, there has never been the development, for instance, of architecture and there has never been a real development of royal luxury. Because of this, the traders of the nineteenth century completely misunderstood and thought that Africa is a primitive country. Even today, there isn't the understanding (except in certain specialities) that Africa is a great culture. Artists such as Picasso have found this...

But, it is certain that the European actor can be deeply touched by the *MB*. But, he has a longer thought process within himself, because there are so many intellectual barriers based on a totally different cultural education that have to yield before he can find himself in the same position as the African actors who go there in a straight line.

SK: As a director, you have been seeing the contradictions in the *MB*—for instance, like Krishna who, though he doesn't wield weapons, raises his *chakra*... Your actors, were they faced with these contradictions when you were discussing the *MB*?

PB: I think this is one of the strongest reasons for doing the *MB*. I say that the *MB* is something for today... I think that today everywhere in the world, one is beginning to see that a truth is more easily expressed through a contradiction than through an affirmation. And during the moments in history when there has been stability and security, there could be an exact parallel between inner truth and outer truth. Civilisations then were based on a unifying affirmation. That was,

perhaps, the great image... If one looks for this unity today, one either becomes cynical or suicidal. But if one says that there is something very positive today and what is positive is that the universe exists through forms which challenge man's reason because they are contradictions and that man's reason tries to find unity, then that is very good. But when he doesn't find it, he invents a false unity, which is terrible. It is much better to face the challenge of the contradictions than avoid the challenge of the contradictions with a false and facile unity, which is what politicians try to do.

Over the last ten years, one has seen a great and vital respect for the reality of contradictions. This has been the basis of all the work that all of us at Stratford have been doing over the last thirty years... to rediscover that the strength of Shakespeare is in the compressed intensity of a theatre experience where conflict is the basis of theatrical life, expressing the endless contradictions of human beings within the human experience. The first impression I had of the *MB* was that, in a way, this was a Shakespearean work and, like any other epic, on a heightened and constantly idealised plane. The humanity of the *MB* is in the extraordinary originality of the ancient epic which introduces all these challenging elements of contradiction, both in human beings and in the gods.

SK: This was understood by the actors?

PB: All this is inherent in the international group because the moment the international group begins to work together, each moment it is clear that one person's way of seeing something is in contradiction with another person's way of looking at it. It has to be.

SK: Since there is a definite text worked out by Jean-Claude Carriere in collaboration with you and your actors, what are the major changes you have envisaged from the point of presentation?

PB: When we set out we said we would try to have something between five to ten years. We tried to follow the shape of the basic *MB* story—the Kaurava-Pandava feud. That gave us our lifeline. Then we would look at all the characters and stories. There are a thousand stories we can't tell.

SK: Do you think that somewhere you found something that was inevitable but because of the theatre... you had to forego some of the events in the *MB*?

PB: Everything we had to cut was a pity, everything. But, for instance, for purely theatrical reasons, we decided to leave out Vidura. Now, this was a major decision because from many points of view, he brings something of great importance into the original story. On the other hand, theatrically, the weight that he represents is also represented by Bhishma so, Bhishma, in a sense, dramatically becomes both Bhishma and Vidura.

SK: Since I saw the production on one single day at the Theatre Bouffes du Nord, I feel it has a definite atmosphere and has left a deep imprint on me... such an environmental theatre experience cannot be repeated elsewhere and, in that case, will the space not dictate its own terms for the impact? The presentation at the quarry in Avignon was something most 'unmissable'.

PB: For us, it is always terrible to leave our own conditions, to leave your own

ground and play somewhere else... sometimes, it's good... sometimes it's bad, so I cannot tell you in advance.

SK: Did you rehearse here ever or is this the first time?

PB: We chose the place ourselves... the thing is in Avignon, nobody's ever played here. In the town, all the spaces, which are beautiful... they are all Catholic and of the Middle Ages. Every environment tells us a story... that's what it's there for and I thought that the last thing that can help the *MB* is to have a Middle Ages and Catholic environment. So that eliminated every space... on the other hand, we once had a very fine experience with *The Conference of the Birds* in Adelaide, Australia, where we played in a quarry... There are around 100 quarries in the south of France. We visited lots of them and found one which was just right.

Pure stage once again becomes universal, international. What is essential, I think, in the *MB*, what makes it universal is that although you keep on saying that there is something absolutely specific, very Indian... what is universal then is the element that breaks out—earth, fire, air, water, sky...

They couldn't have played with any feeling of confidence if they hadn't been to India... India can show them how to play... going to India wouldn't make any actor a better actor. But instead of feeling a cheat... he has been to India and so something in him is clarified. The actors are not pretending to tell people about some place they have never been to. They do not pretend that they're becoming great scholars. Their visit to India was very vital for them.

SK: Many script solutions have been amazing and, in particular, for the war scenes, the actors appear to have been trained in the martial arts. What have been the sources behind this? I was wondering how the war scenes would be treated.

PB: Before he joined us, one of our actors spent some time in Kerala, learning the *Kalari* martial arts. Also went to Manipur, Taiwan and Hongkong to study the local martial arts because all the Chinese and Japanese martial arts come from India. He went and practised by himself and worked with different teachers so as to be able to find a form which we could adapt to our people.

SK: Such a project entails so many problems. Which, according to you were the most terrible ones you had to confront?

PB: Everything that can be said about problems is said in the *BG*. The central problem is how to present the action of the *MB* without losing the thread. The point is not to be lost within the action.

SK: Did this tremendous experience affect you at a very personal level—as a creative artist, as one who visualised it?

PB: Yes, it did. The one thing that I've always tried to bring into the theatre is to abolish the distinction between theatre work and life because I found that a good respect for professionalism has again its own contradictions... a good professional is somebody whose private and personal life is kept completely apart and an amateur is somebody whose love and enthusiasm takes him straight up into the ordinary working of the theatre but with very limited results.

Professionalism can also easily become a form of cynicism. An artiste cannot

divide into two separate compartments. I was very touched when I met for the first time a Kutiyattam artiste and I asked him what he was trying to do, what he was actually aiming at when playing such a highly formalised mode. "I am trying to bring the whole of my own life into it." In this way, it is not possible for anybody to work on the *MB* and be the same again.

SK: Visually, for the costumes, what were the main points that you had kept in mind? Do you universalize or Indianize?

PB: Chloe and I have a very close understanding on the essential and that is, that theatre design, like theatre music, cannot exist apart. That's why it happens that Chloe doesn't work by providing sketches. There isn't anything that could be put high up on the wall or put in our programme because theatre design is not static. It's part of the fluid life of a performance and so it has to come into being just hand-in-glove with the evolution of a performance. As one works, the images take shape, with a certain direction but with an enormous amount of trial and error. You don't start with an image... an image is what remains.

At first, one has ideas. One cannot not have them but they are to be simplified, purified and eliminated and we have lots of images which have to be discarded. And yet, something remains. For instance, in Rajasthan, in the local miniatures you see scenes from the *MB*. These scenes are suggestive through a style which, for Indians, is Rajasthani but, for us, it's style that can cover the body very simply.

My aim in the theatre is that while secretly we use all sorts of artificial devices, we should take care never to appear artificial... so that things, except to specialists like yourself, should not be noticed.

SK: About the music, in order to evoke certain moods, what would be the main problems?

PB: The main problem is I was convinced that music cannot be done all in a frenzy. I don't believe that there is today a composer who is sufficiently free from his own subjective preoccupations. Improvisation, in India, is based on there being a very, very strict code. The difficulty was to find a way of having musicians of different schools, consequently each one with his own code, to improvise together and this was a big, big risk which was only solved by long work through which the high quality of musicians... each one a traditional musician of a different tradition—but each one was interested in the challenge of finding a common language around which to improvise. Gradually, the unity created itself by the difficulty... this was the greatest difficulty... making music for us.

SK: Can you tell us something about the logistics of the performance?

PB: In no circumstances and at no time, can this become a commercial venture. It is not like a film. It's like opera and ballet which is, permanently, every performance, at a loss. Therefore, wherever we go, someone has to pay for it.

visual impact and not with its ethnic connotations. Constantly, I encountered vivid images that substituted my very own earlier ones of the *Mahabharata*, stripping them of their ornamentations, frills and Puranic romanticism. And in doing so, they penetrated my sensitivities with their ultimate meaning. For me, the twelve hours were not only theatre but an exposure to the unknown territories of my own mind and emotions.

On the one hand, I was spell-bound and moved with a growing conviction that what I saw unfolding in front of me was the only way, in the given environment, that an epic could trace the history of human civilisation. And, on the other, I felt a tremendous frustration because of my inability to understand the language.

I shall try to capture the magic of some moments (amongst hundreds) during the twelve hours. Mine is not a chronological account, nor an attempt to recall the use of the various dance and music traditions of India. Instead, it is more in the nature of jottings of my own impressions on 'new dimensions and meaning of theatre' and the questions that were raised in my mind.

The entire *Mahabharata* was presented in three parts. The first part began with the birth of Satyawati and ended with the Pandavas losing everything in the dice game and leaving for the forest. The second part commenced with the Pandavas' exile in the forest, with Duryodhana, Duhshasana and Karna keeping constant vigil. It included Hidimba's meeting with Bhima, Arjuna getting his weapons from the *Shami Vriksha* and ended with the stay of the Pandavas in Virata's palace. The third part basically dealt with the battle of Kurukshetra, Krishna's death and the annihilation of the race and ended with a perplexed Yudhishthira on his way to *Moksha*.



The Dice Game—seated are Shakuni (Douta Seck) and Yudhishthira (Matthias Habich).
(Photo: Georges Meran, Agence Photos Point de Vue, Avignon).

The Music

Toshi, the Japanese composer, is a great friend of India (an ardent admirer of Kishori Amonkar). It was fascinating to hear him sing Rabindra Sangeet, play the *tabla* and *ghatam*, use an Australian aboriginal flute. His group of musicians played many wind, string and percussion instruments from all over the east, including our *nadaswaram* and *shehnai*. When asked about his concept of music for theatre he replied: "Music in theatre depends on the quality of silence. This silence has its own sound which determines and creates the sound of music." I have always maintained that, in theatre, music and dance have to shed their grammar and take over a new identity. Toshi spelt it out as—"the identity of understanding and reacting to silences."

The Sets

Most of the time it was the rocks, sand, water, mud and fire. All kinds of fire: burning twigs, enormous brass lamps, small *dive*-s floating in the stream, torches creating patterns in the darkness, Balinese fire circles on the sand (resembling fire lines in the forests and on hill-tops), even inflammable powder thrown at the torches to create explosions of light.

A few thatched bamboo sections, which the actors carried in and out as required, were used sparingly. They became Virata's palace or trenches in the battle-field or the forest hut in which the Pandavas lived.

At times, an enormous white sheet covered the sand on which were scattered white bolsters and colourful Rajasthani carpets. Occasionally, masses of *chatai*-s were unrolled, creating the image and sound of tiny sea-waves washing the shore.

The Child

The *Mahabharata* is a narration of events. It is always *uvacha* (spoken). In Carriere's *Mahabharata*, Vyasa narrates to a child. It is the child that raises questions and Ganesha who writes down Vyasa's explanations. The wisdom of childhood in raising simple yet pertinent questions and accepting answers creates a whole structure of purity and naivety in which the audience participates.

Ganesha and Krishna

Maurice Benichou played Ganesha, Vyasa's scribe, who also answered many of the child's queries. During the first part, in the silence, while Kunti, Draupadi and the Pandavas slept, the soft sounds of a flute enveloped them.

"Who is playing the flute?" the child asked.

"Krishna" replied Ganesha.

"Can I see him?"

"Of course you can. He is everywhere. He is within you and me."

"Can I see him in you?"

"Yes, you can" replied Ganesha and hid himself behind a yellow saree-curtain, held by Vyasa and the child. As the yellow curtain was removed, Benichou was seen in the reclining *Sheshashayi* pose of Vishnu. His whole demeanour had changed. He was no more Ganesha, the next-door friend, but Krishna, the mystic. Throughout the Krishna-episodes that he played later, he displayed a tremendous

inner glow. He was a counsellor, philosopher, politician, an emissary for peace, his outward calm erupting into wrath as he killed Shishupala. During Kurukshetra, he became a force that read, analysed and shaped inevitable destiny. His *Virata-Darshana* (Cosmic Trance) was breathtaking in its simplicity.

Krishna, in the presence of the Kauravas, goes into a cosmic trance. Benichou stood with his back to the audience. A pale-blue drape was held behind him, in front of the acting space, which created an image of the skies descending on the earth. Dhritarashtra saw the cosmic image despite his blindness and knelt in front of Krishna. So did Bhishma. Duhshasana and Duryodhana remained untouched, almost bewildered at their father's reaction.

Brook's capacity in capturing epic moments with utter simplicity and discovering extraordinary images in ordinary happenings continually surprised me.

Krishna's death was yet another unforgettable image. We had already travelled through eleven hours of the *Mahabharata*. It was six in the morning. The first rays of the sun had reached the quarry. Birds had started chirping and flying above us. A cool, soft breeze created ripples in the pools of water. Vyasa and the child spread a green saree on the sand. Krishna reclined on it. A *Vyadha* (hunter) came, mimed the shooting of an arrow and with his own hands put a stick representing an arrow between Krishna's toes. He looked at Krishna and, realising who he had killed, ran away in anguish and shock. The child asked: "Vyasa, what is happening to Krishna?"

Vyasa: "He is leaving us."

Child: "But I wanted to ask him a question."

Vyasa said he could. The child approached Krishna.

"Can I ask you something?"

Krishna nodded his head and said: "Be quick, though. My time is running out."

Child: "What did you whisper in Arjuna's ears during the war?"

Krishna smiled, thought for a moment and said, "I can tell things only once."

And he died. The death of Krishna, as a new day was about to begin, symbolised for me the cycle of continuity. If theatre can achieve this, what else does one need to have faith in?

Gandhari and the Kauravas

I had read Iravati Karve's *Yuganta* and her commentary on Gandhari. Carriere's Gandhari bore a striking resemblance to her interpretation. Gandhari, a princess from a faraway land, arrives atop an elephant—radiant and excited about her forthcoming marriage. (A group of actors and musicians created the movement of the elephant, others held aloft a bamboo structure, in which sat Gandhari—to complete the picture of the grand procession). Her frustration on learning about her husband's blindness, her blindfolding herself as a mark of protest, her agony and her love for her children—specially Duryodhana, the first-born—created many memorable moments. The greatest of them was the birth of Duryodhana.

The *Mahabharata* narrates that Gandhari gave birth to an enormous ball

of steel (*pinda*) which was cut up into a hundred pieces, out of which were born the hundred Kauravas.

Le *Mahabharata*'s Gandhari was pregnant for two years without any signs of delivering the child. In sheer desperation, she summons her maid to hit on her stomach with an iron rod. The maid does so and Gandhari stands with outstretched hands bearing the agony. Near her appears the ball of steel containing the hundred embryos of the Kauravas. As the first Kaurava (Duryodhana) is about to emerge, ill omens flood in—wind sounds, calls of the jackal. From behind the rocks, emerges a coiled-up body bound in red cloth. It tumbles about twenty yards forward through the sand and into the muddy pool where Gandhari and Dhritarashtra stand waiting eagerly. The draped body, still looking like a bundle, clings on to Gandhari's knees, water dripping from the red covering—making it look like a blood-covered embryo. An evil wail emanates from the bundle as it uncoils, still clutching Gandhari. A head appears—an evil, bearded face—wailing like a new-born babe. As Duryodhana, Andrzej Seweryn, the Polish actor, infused a tremendous voltage of electrifying energy in whatever he did—including the birth. A medium-sized man, as an actor he seemed gigantic, filling up the quarry with his presence and inner power.

On the other hand, Duhshasana—played by Georges Corraface, a handsome Greek actor with a delicate face and all eyes—created a fascinating, almost tender relationship with his brother Duryodhana. He shared his passions, his thoughts, had eyes only for him even while rolling mats or removing bamboo-structures (a routine that all actors followed for scene changes). In fact, the Kauravas emerged as a complete family, with Dhritarashtra and Gandhari as loving parents of problem-children.

Kunti and the Pandavas

As against the dramatic images of the Kaurava family, Kunti and her relationship with the five Pandavas was dealt with in a very human, day-to-day manner. Kunti, in her outfit, resembled a matriarchal, strong-willed Rajasthani woman. She sat in a small group sharing food with her sons and slept near them on the sands without any bedding. Together, the images they created were very similar to those one encounters on the pavements of Bombay. I realised that relationships and qualities of mind that one almost revered as part of an epic, could be discovered anywhere, any time—if only one has the perception. There *can* be a Kunti amongst the construction workers of Bombay, or an Arjuna in the hutments. It is not necessary to indulge in gloss and romanticism to capture an epic quality or a historical moment in theatre.

Kunti, when first introduced, keeps on staring fixedly at the sun.

"Why is she staring at the sun?" the child asks.

"It is a special secret", says Vyasa.

Throughout the sequence of events—her marriage to Pandu, Pandu's death, Kunti's verdict that Draupadi be shared by the five sons—the mystery of her fascination for the Sun lurks in the background. It is only when Arjuna and Karna are about to enter into a fierce combat in Dhritarashtra's palace, that Kunti swoons.



Arjuna (Vittorio Mezzogiorno) and Yudhishtira (Matthias Habich).
(Photo: Alain Sauvan, Agence Photos Point de Vue, Avignon).

"What has happened to her?" the child asks.

"I will tell you," says Vyasa and a flashback begins.

A negro actor, in a flowing red garment, appears at the top of the stadium and runs down to greet Kunti. The scene that followed was hilarious—the young Kunti, unaware of the fact that if you invoked a god like the Sun and he blessed you with his appearance, you had to sleep with him!

The Pandavas somehow failed to impress me as a total family. Individually they were good, but the bond between them did not seem to emerge. The narcissist Arjuna, the confused Yudhishtira, the child-like Bhima, the strong-willed Draupadi (played by Mallika Sarabhai) had somehow found no time for each other.

Amba

To trace the whole journey of the *Mahabharata*—starting with the birth of Satyawati and her son Vyasa till the death of Krishna and the annihilation of the race—to make French audiences follow the confusing relationships and family tree was a marathon task. I admired Carriere's innovative ways of introducing a character and weaving his or her story-line through the fast-developing narration. Amba was one such character. The frustrated and angry Amba appears in the early part of the *Mahabharata*, when Bhishma refuses to marry her and she vows to avenge her humiliation by killing him. She returns again towards the end during the Kurukshetra battle, as Shikhandi, and helps Arjuna in killing Bhishma. Carriere's Amba roams around the forests dishevelled, frustrated, aimless—in eternal search



Amba (Pascaline Pointillart) being consoled by Draupadi (Mallika Sarabhai).
(Photo: Michel Dieuzaide, Paris).

of the moment for revenge. She meets the Pandavas, talks to Draupadi. When she returns as Shikhandi, the audience is familiar with her anguish, having seen her a couple of times during the unfolding of the epic.

Ganga

Brook's Ganga appears wading her way through the stream, with a thin flowing, white silk covering her head. She meets and marries Shantanu and, as narrated in the *Mahabharata*, drowns her new-born infants. The use of the white silk and simple gestures captured the poetry of the myth. Ganga clutched her white scarf and it became her baby. She kissed it and then flung it into the pool of water. The scarf unwound and floated in mid-air for a while, creating an image of drifting water taking the baby away. It was delightful to watch a simple, silken drape, with its fluid lines, create an abstract moment of beauty.

The African Actors

Bhishma, Parashurama, Bhima, Ghatotkacha and Shakuni—were all Africans and remained Africans. In fact, their Africanness was their greatest asset. Bhishma did not look an Indian image of Bhishma, but his African face, body and mind showed the wisdom and calmness that is Bhishma. Parashurama arrived banging his staff in a tribal African manner—but brought with him Parashurama's wrath and power. Bhima's simple mind, strong body and affectionate soul was clearly evident in the African physique. One could never visualise a better Shakuni—he sat playing the dice game, with his thin African arms and legs,

jaw protruding, bulging eyes staring. He held the dice in his palms and flicked his wrists in a way that convinced you of his mumbo-jumbo power. Watching these African actors, one felt convinced that it is not ethnic familiarity or behaviour patterns that define characters, but something beyond these apparent barriers—a deeper meaning and intention which gives them their identity.

Humour

Traditionally, Indian folk theatre deals with the epics in a very special way—for instance, *Kirtana* or *Pandavani* give them a local colour. All characters display commonly-known behaviour patterns and the treatment is generally humorous, though with philosophical connotations. In the absence of such a tradition in the west, Brook and Carriere have discovered humour in the naivety of situations—for instance, the Kunti-Sun meeting, the Bhima-Hidimba-Ghatotkacha episode, *Ashwathama—the elephant—is dead* sequence and the palace of Virata. All these episodes were highly amusing, and created innovatively almost always by African and Balinese actors. Is it because, culturally, they are more capable than European actors of throwing themselves into a naive situation and enjoying it?

Kurukshetra

Kurukshetra was annihilation. The whole environment erupted: Trumpets, war cries, trampling feet sending the sand flying, mud-soaked bodies, faces covered in blood, the anguish of the women as they moved through the pile of dead bodies identifying their sons and husbands and, during all this turmoil, Krishna explaining to Arjuna the inevitability of destruction!

Karna's Death

A wheel rolling in the sand, pushed by one hand, a horse-whip lashing in the other—these were Krishna and Shalya, the two charioteers, followed by Arjuna and Karna. They circled, confronting each other in the sand pit, rode through water, disappeared behind rocks, chasing one another, emerged from the gangways of the stadium—caught in a frenzy to kill. Karna's chariot wheel got stuck in the pool of muddy water and Arjuna, advised by Krishna, killed him. In principle it was similar to war games that children normally play and while playing believe in. Imagine the conviction and dedication with which the actors must have played their game to involve a thousand spectators to share their belief and feeling of truth!

Bhishma's Death

Bhishma's death was equally simple and stark. He rode on top of a bamboo structure held up by the Kaurava soldiers and climbed down at the sight of Shikhandi, aware that his final moment had arrived. Hiding behind Shikhandi, Arjuna aimed his arrow. Krishna held it by his thumb and fore-finger and gradually walked towards Bhishma who stood gazing fixedly at Krishna and the approaching arrow. The music played a steady siren-like note. The moment seemed to continue for hours as everybody stood still—only the arrow travelled in Krishna's hand. Krishna stuck the arrow in Bhishma's arm, Bhishma recoiled under its impact and, with a thud, the bamboo structure held by the soldiers fell to the ground. Bhishma staggered on it and lay prostrate. The actors around him stuck hundreds

of bamboo-sticks in the structure creating an impression of arrows invading Bhishma's body. Two of the sticks, crossing each other, made a head-rest and he was carried in, on his bed of arrows. Bhishma receiving and welcoming the call of death—is an image that registered deeply in my mind.

Duryodhana's Death

I had fallen in love with Duryodhana, as indeed had all those who saw him. He was every inch evil with a very human cause-and-effect syndrome written all over him. His agonized chanting as he lay huddled up in a cave (created by a cloth held over him), his animal passion as he engaged in his battle with Bhima, his bewilderment and frustration as he heard Krishna advise Bhima to hit him in the thigh, his effort to hold on to life as he lay crippled and mud-soaked near the pool of water, his limbs and senses gradually fading while his energies slowly subsided. How one wished he would die soon and be saved the suffering!

The Other Deaths

Drona's death, on the other hand, was ritualistic in an Indo-Japanese manner. On learning of his son's death, he sat cross-legged on the sand and emptied an earthen-jar full of coloured water on himself, getting ready for human-sacrifice or harakiri. Dhrishtadyumna, his face painted like a blood-red mask, approached and beheaded him.

Abhimanyu's death in the maze was, likewise, in the tradition of the stick dance. Duhshasana's death was presented in the Kathakali manner, with Bhima pulling his entrails out. Both these deaths failed to register any impact since the forms used were far too obvious. The image that haunts me still is when Draupadi (Malika Sarabhai) came towards Duhshasana's dead body and spread her hair on the open wound and Bhima with his blood-covered hands smeared her hair. All this happened while Gandhari stood watching a few yards away, holding on to a distraught Duryodhana, wailing, "My only living son". This is a vivid picture of the animal in man that war unleashes.

The war at last was over—with dead bodies scattered all over the sand-pit. The women came, covered their own dead with colourful sheets. The sand—and on it the scattered colours—was all that remained of a race that had lived, loved, fought and disappeared.

Theatre Through Images

How surprising it is to find one's own mind being trained. After being in tune with the stark simplicity of Brook's treatment of the *Mahabharata*, my mind seemed to react adversely to anything that represented obvious acceptable norms. For instance, the Balinese tradition of fire I saw being used for the first time. It resembles the patterns which fire-lines create in India in the forests and on hill-tops during the winter months. It was fascinating on account of its sheer dramatic novelty but did not move me. It was too grand to create a lasting image in my mind.

As against this a simple device to create a moment disturbed me deeply—



The disrobing of Draupadi (Mallika Sarabhai). Also in the foreground is Duhshasana (Georges Corraface).

(Photo: Valerie Suau, Agence Photos Point de Vue, Avignon).

for instance, the bee attacking Karna's thigh. Karna sat with Parashurama's hand on his lap. Musicians came in the arena blowing softly on long Australian aboriginal weed-instruments. One of them circled Karna and touched his thigh with the instrument. Karna winced with pain. The musician went away still playing and sounding like a departing bee. Karna touched his thigh and then looked at it. It was covered with blood. A weed instrument generated an undefined yet unforgettable magical moment in the theatre!

Draupadi's disrobing was a similar, vivid moment. The Pandavas looked like ordinary human beings in their off-white clothes. A shrieking Draupadi was dragged by her hair. Duryodhana bared his thigh for her to sit on and Duhshasana sneered and chuckled — while the Pandavas looked on helplessly. Dignified Bhishma, compassionate Gandhari, Dhritarashtra, the king, and Karna, the righteous man, decided it was not their responsibility to interfere. A morbid situation of a woman being raped in broad daylight! Draupadi cried out to Krishna as Duhshasana pulled at her saree. Krishna came holding yards of cloth in his hands, handed over one end to Duhshasana and, standing near Draupadi, kept on unrolling it as Duhshasana pulled. Duhshasana got entangled in the cloth and eventually collapsed.

The whole sequence convinced me once again that the make-believe world of theatre generated its own reality and sense of truth — perhaps better, if untouched by theatrical conventions and trappings. We have ample evidence of this in our folk and tribal cultures. It is the urban, analytical faculty of our minds that has led us to a false and pretentious idea of theatre which attempts to recreate reality and thereby bypasses the 'truth'.

In Conclusion

The whole week of the *Mahabharata* at Avignon was a greatly rewarding and penetrating experience for me. Of course, unavoidably, my ethnic feelings surfaced at times with some complaints.

For instance—I missed the episodes of Draupadi's wedding to Arjuna, the house of lac, the stories of Kacha-Devayani, Dushyanta-Shakuntala etc. (Carriere mentioned that he had written many of them and that they would be presented separately). I also missed in the characterisations the generosity of Karna—Bruce Myers played him as too much of an introvert, in constant battle with the world. Kunti played by Josephine Derenne had an earthy quality but could not convey sufficiently her wisdom and tenacity. Draupadi (Mallika Sarabhai) I found to be still in the process of discovering the *Shakti* which she symbolises. Matthias Habich's Yudhishtira, the confused dreamer, came across, on many occasions, as a weak *kshatriya*. Vittorio Mezzogiorno's Arjuna conveyed self-centred, narcissistic qualities rather than his all-pervading charm.

Two excerpts from a note I had written to Brook I find very relevant:

"Something could be done about Krishna's physical image. Indians—many of them—are against the 'Satya Shri Sai Baba' cult and physically Benichou looks like him."

"The women at times disturbed me in the way they sat—specially in Virata's palace. There is something very distinct in the way an oriental woman sits. There is a certain fluidity even when she stretches her legs and rests her arms on a bolster."

The costumes looked too stitched for the *Mahabharata* characters. ("There was no option as the actors had to run around so much", said Chloe Obolensky, the designer).

However, I do not attach much value to these reactions of mine. What I experienced during the eight days totally wipes out these minor distractions. *Le Mahabharata* will always remain a part of me.

Mohini Attam—A Perspective

Nalanda Dance Research Centre, Bombay, in collaboration with the Sopanam Institute, Trivandrum, and the Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, Bombay, conducted last year a two-day Seminar on *Mohini Attam—A Perspective*, with a view to discussing this dance form and presenting the work and conclusions arrived at by the research scholars.

Nalanda, officially recognised as a dance research institute by the Government of India, has been conducting research in Mohini Attam for the past fifteen years under the direction of Dr. Kanak Rele. In 1969, the Sangeet Natak Akademi gave Dr. Rele a grant to conduct field study in Kerala on Mohini Attam. In 1971, she received a grant from the Ford Foundation to make films of the last surviving performers (since then deceased) of Mohini Attam—Kunjukuttyamma (82) and Chinnammamma (79). The only extant exhaustive evidence of this dance style as it was practised at the turn of the century, the films (screened at the Seminar) captured the essence of both *nritya* and *nritya* in Mohini Attam.

The Sangeet Natak Akademi, under its scheme *Revival of Dying Art Forms*, had instituted a project of research on Mohini Attam in 1979-80-81, and entrusted the work to the Sopanam Institute under the direction of Kavalam Narayan Panikkar. We reproduce below the paper he presented at the Seminar.

* * *

Mohini Attam is facing a difficult situation in Kerala owing to many reasons. There are different schools; each one, in effect, either keeps closer to Bharata Natyam or to Kathakali. One result is that this art form does not have the self-generative force to strike an individuality that it legitimately should possess. Affinity to Bharata Natyam is totally irrelevant and unscientific whereas nearness to Kathakali can be justified, at least to some extent, because of the intrinsically common basis on which both these arts have grown. It is quite unfortunate that the regional music of Kerala has been neglected all these years, with the result that Mohini Attam has been depending solely on the Carnatic style of music. The *gamaka*-s, emphasised in the Sopanam style of music, and its rhythm patterns should form part and parcel of this art form. We find instead that nowadays even Kathakali music is being corrupted by a slow drift away from tradition.

My approach to this style of dance is generally based on an aesthetic point of view, taking into consideration certain distinctive regional and local characteristics of allied art forms, having unmistakable links with its kinetic, structural, rhythmic, musical and instrumental aspects.

Historical Background

During the second Chera dynasty, in the ninth or tenth century, there was a revival of Sanskrit theatre as also of dance. The dancing girls, known as *Kuthachi*-s, were held in high esteem in society. *Thevitchi*-s and *Kuthachi*-s belonged to two different categories by virtue of their work in the temple. *Thevitchi*-s or *Theavaradiyar*-s were engaged in relatively menial work while the *Kuthachi*-s were the official temple dancers. In the Chera country, the inferior dancers of the *Devadasi* variety were

never allowed to hold an equal position with the *Kuthachi*-s in the official dance rituals of the temple. In the Pandyan temples, including those at Suchindram and Kanyakumari, *Theavaradiyar*-s held a more important position. The *Kuthachi Nangyar*-s were the custodians of a highly developed dance called *Nangyarkuttu*, considered as the accepted women's dance form. They came into prominence in temples (like Kandiur) during the eleventh, twelfth and thirteenth centuries. Even now certain Nangyar families continue to enjoy the right of conducting *Kuttu* as a ritual in temples such as Ambalapuzha.

Other Arts

The sculptures or paintings on the temple walls, although meagre in number, are eloquent and of great significance. (For instance, the *Kumbha* dance poses in the Kidangur and Thirunavaya temples.) Also, the circumstantial evidence in the dance movements of the art of *Chattira namboothiri*-s (*Yatrakali namboothiri*-s) is relevant in the context of a reassessment of the art. In *Yatrakali*, a loosely-knit, night-long performance with the structure of variety entertainment, there is a sequence called *Mohinipurappad*, which depicts the story of *Amrutaharanam*. An actor (playing Mohini) enters, and dances while others sit around as *asura*-s.

The present repertoire of Mohini Attam became imbued with Bharata Natyam elements only during Svati Tirunal's time. The result was that the art had to combine, in its basic movement patterns, many elements unknown to it till that time. The introduction of *varnam*, *thillana*, *jatiswaram* and *javali* in Mohini Attam was an experiment conducted by the Bharata Natyam *nattuvanar*-s. These musical compositions belonged to a totally different discipline. Now we find that *saptam* (*shabdham*) is also introduced, though its relevance in the context of Mohini Attam is doubtful.

We are not in a position to define precisely what were the items included in its traditional repertoire but we find certain useful references in the *Thullal kriti*-s of Kunchan Nambiyar like *Chinthu*, *Ammanattam* etc. In any case, merely knowing the names of items cannot really help us. Details about the musical and dance structure are more important in building up and enriching the art. The art of *Thullal* and *Thullal* literature provide us ample clues in regard to the many technical aspects, especially the *tala* system and dance movements. *Thullal* itself had borrowed many folk elements mainly from *Patayani* and given them a classical sophistication. The *mukkanni* movements of the footwork, for instance, in the *Ganapati—Pativattam* in *Thullal* clearly show its indebtedness to the *Patayani* dance. Thus the *chari*-s of many dance forms have common links. Mohini Attam's allegiance to the regional art forms, therefore, cannot be overlooked.

However, when the purity of any *Deshi* style is tampered with, it is possible to discover the missing links by probing into the traditional arts of the region. In the case of Mohini Attam, what we learn from the priceless treasure of *Thullal* and other allied arts provides good material for research. We also find that a number of old musical and dance forms, descended from antique origin, have common features. The same or similar *tala svaroopas* (rhythm structures) can be seen in the Gandharva songs of Kaniyan (the village astrologer), the sorcery songs of Velan, the *Thuyilunarthu* songs of Panan (the harbinger of the new year) and so on. The spirit of all these can be felt in the art of *Thullal*. Many folk *tala*-s like *Kumbhom*, *Marmam*, *Lakshmi*, *Kundanachi*, *Atantha*, *Karika* (Panchari), *Chempata* etc. have

been incorporated in *Thullal*. *Patayani* and *Vijayanritham* (*Arjuna Nritham* also known as *Mayilpithukkam*), are very rich in rhythm. *Vijayanritham* has to its credit 155 *tala-s* with their *vaitari-s* (*bol-s*) and a host of other *Ekatala vaitari-s* (of single beat).

The rhythm system of Kerala forms may be explained thus. There are seven major *tala-s*: 1) *Ekachuzhadi* (with seven varieties), 2) *Dhruvachuzhadi* (with seven), 3) *Chaturashrayam* (with five), 4) *Kumbhom* (with five), 5) *Shodasam* (with sixteen), 6) *Shripathi* (with seven) and 7) *Chachaputam* (with 108) thus making a total of 155. Let us take the first one—*Ekachuzhadi*. The basic fact is that all the *tala-s* work as *hridaya tala-s* or the rhythm of the heart. (1) *Ekam*: One *matra* (one beat and one *virama* or pause). This is called *lakh*. (This *virama* applies to all *tala-s*). (2) *Rupam*: Two *matra-s* (two beats and one *virama*). This is called *guru*; (3) *Chempata*: Three *matra-s* (called *plutam*); (4) *Karika*: Four *matra-s* (called *kakapadam*); (5) *Panchari*: Five *matra-s*; (6) *Varmam*: Six *matra-s* and (7) *Kumbhom*: Seven *matra-s*. Of the above, the first five jointly make one main *tala* in the system called *Marmam*.

The *vaitari-s* in Kerala art forms have their own peculiarities as in other *Deshi* systems and definite phonetical differences distinguishing them from those of Bharata Natyam. This fact should not be overlooked when we use *chollu-s* in Mohini Attam. *Cheche*, *kukumtari*, *khikam*, *tenkuku*, *nakatarakam*, *dhiyam*, *tinganeke dantam* etc., are some of the *shushkakshara-s* in Kerala *chollu-s*. These are preserved in the *tattakkara-s* of different instruments like Edakka, Maddalam, Udukk, Tuti etc. One more point to be noted is that the fingering system denoting the *jati-s* is not followed in the Kerala *tala* systems; instead, each *tala* is built up as a *tala svaroopam* or total rhythmic form.

With regard to the melody aspect, there is a simple treatment of melody in the Sopana style. This system had developed from the style of chanting of the Veda *mantra-s* of the region and many other articulations in the different folk forms, with an essentially ritualistic base. *Othu Pizhachu Kuttyai* is an old saying perhaps coined by the *namboothiri-s*. It means "Veda chanting went wrong because of the dramatic articulation." The Chakiyars have 21 *svara-s* in usage: Indalam, Muralindalam, Tarkan, Viratarkan, Tondur, Danam, Poraniru, Sri Kandhi, Cheti, Panchamam, etc. Some of the *svara-s* like Poraniru and Sri Kandhi are also names of *raga-s*. But these *svara-s*, although they have a sing-song tone, cannot be treated as music. When we come to the singing of *Tyani-s* (invocatory songs, sung to the accompaniment of Edakka before the sanctum of the temple), we have regular music emerging from the Vedic and folk background. It develops further in *Ashtapadi* singing and *Kalamezhuthupattu* (songs sung around the painting of Kali's figure on the floor with powder made of fine natural colours). The musical system is expressed with better flourishes in Krishnattam music and finally in Kathakali music. The main feature of Sopanam music is its simplicity, maintained by using only the *Jivasvara-s* in the *raga*. *Ragalapana*, to the accompaniment of rhythm with the swinging *gamaka prayoga*, is its special feature. There are very interesting musical structures like those of *tyani*, *dandakam* etc. The singing of *Kattalasvara-s*, showing the frame of the *raga-s*, is also a special feature of *tyani*.

This musical system is fast disappearing. There are certain important *bani-s* (*gharana-s*) which even now prevail in some temples like Guruvayur, Ramamangalam, Thirumandhamkunnu, Chottanikkara, Pazhoor, Kidangur etc. Shri Naralathu Rama Poduval (Thirumandhamkunnu Bani) and Shri Guruvayur Janardanan Nedungadi (Guruvayur Bani) are two noted musicians who represent two distinct styles. The former, is known for its *tandava* and the latter for its *lasya* touches.

I wish to acknowledge my debt of gratitude to the following masters in different art fields, who have been of great help in my research work on Mohini Attam.

1. Shri Mitran Namboothiri: *Yatrakali*.
2. Shri Madhavan Pillai: *Patayani*.
3. Shri Kazhakkuttam Bhaskara Pillai: *Thullal*.
4. Shri C. V. Govindan Kutty Nair: *Kalari Payattu*.
5. Shri Parameswara Menon: *Mohini Attam*, *Kurathi Attam* and *Thullal*.
6. Shri Naralathu Rama Poduval: *Sopana Music*.
7. Shri Janardanan Nedungadi: *Sopana Music*.
8. Shri Pazhoor Damodara Marar: *Sopana Music* and *Mudiyettu*.
9. Shri Unnikrishna Panikkar: *Kathakali Music*.
10. The late Shri Kidangur Gopala Marar: *Sopanam Music*.
11. Shri Chengarappally Aniyar: *Kathakali*.
12. Shri K. R. Shiva Shankara Panikkar: *Sopana Music*.
13. Kurichi P. S. Kumaran: *Vijayanritham*.

The Tradition of Maahaari Dance

Jiwan Pani

Deep in the misty distance of time, *odra-nritya* (now popularly known as Odissi) evolved out of the ritual dancing of the consecrated girls called *devadaasi*-s. These ritual danseuses attached to the temple of Lord Jagannatha at Puri are known as *maahaari*-s. They used to perform inside the temple every day at specified periods and their dance was regarded as one of the thirty-six essential temple services (*niyoga*). The tradition started declining from the eighteenth century and survived till the third decade of this century, almost worn to a shadow. It is now more than forty years since a *maahaari* has danced inside the temple premises.

In fact, there were two kinds of *maahaari*-s; the singing (*gaauṇī*) *maahaari* and the dancing (*naachuni*) *maahaari*. Although the *maahaari* dance is extinct, the tradition of singing lines from Jayadeva's *Geetagoṇḍa* by a *gaauṇī* *maahaari* still survives—though in an emaciated form. The only surviving authentic *gaauṇī* *maahaari* is Kokilapriya who is now around sixty.

A few treatises on Odissi music and dance written between the fifteenth and the eighteenth century are still extant. Of these, *Abhinayachandrika* by



The surviving *Maahaari*-s (from left) — Kokilaprabha, Subhasinee, Haripriya and Parasmani.
(Photo Courtesy: Sangeet Natak Akademi, New Delhi).

Maheshwara Mahapatra (fifteenth century) deals most elaborately with the dance tradition. It does not, however, mention the *maahaari*-s or *devadaasi*-s and the manner in which it describes the qualities of a dancer and a few dance postures unmistakably points to the fact that, at the time when it was written, there were two kinds of Odissi dancers: the *devadaasi* in the temple, and the *naachuni* in the royal court. Most probably Maheshwara Mahapatra was a guru of the court dancers.

Before any reason is offered as to why the word *maahaari* finds no mention in an elaborate treatise like the *Abhinayachandrika*, it is necessary to explain what exactly the word means. So far no satisfactory etymological meaning of *maahaari* has been forthcoming. One point of view states: The *naari* (woman) who is *mahat* (auspicious) is *maahaari*. This explanation is not tenable. According to the rules of Sanskrit grammar, *mahat* + *naari* becomes *mahannaari*, which in colloquial language may become *manaari*, but it is almost impossible that it should become *maahaari*. The *Bhaagavatapuraana* says that, at the time of *pralaya* (universal deluge), genuine devotees of Vishnu took shelter in *maharaloka*, the world or area of existence above *svarga* (heaven). In fact, the concept of seven *loka*-s in Indian philosophy and mythology is unique. The word *loka* is derived from the root *lok* meaning 'to see' or 'to perceive' or 'to experience'. Therefore, *loka* is a level of experience and the *saptaloka*-s in ascending order are *bhu*, *bhuva*, *svarga*, *mahara*, *jana*, *tapa* and *satya*. The highest *loka*, i.e. *satyaloka*, is also called *brahmaloka*. According to Vaishnavism, there are nine *loka*-s: above *satyaloka* is *vaikuntha* and the highest is *goloka* where Lord Krishna resides perpetually. The word *go* does not (as is generally believed) mean 'a cow' alone; it primarily means 'ray' or 'light'. Many words compounded with *go* would make no sense if the meaning is interpreted as 'cow'. For instance, *Gomati*, which is the name of a river, etymologically means 'she who possesses go'. Here, if the meaning of *go* is interpreted as 'cow', the connotation of the compound word (*Gomati*) becomes quite strange—a river in which cows swim like fish. The other meaning, however, makes sense: a river that shines. Thus, *goloka* is the level where not cows but pure light is experienced.

In Hindu mythology there are countless references to dancing in the *svargaloka*. The dancers there are called *apsara*-s which literally means 'those women who have moved up from the surface of water'. What a poetic conception! The dancer who dances in *svargaloka* does not have a body like that of a human being, on which gravitational force perpetually works, but a beautiful ethereal body made up of clouds of various hues which rise from the surface of the sea. The aim of an *apsara*'s dance is to give the audience aesthetic entertainment of the highest order. The aim of a *devadaasi*'s dance goes much beyond, since it is a prayer, a form of worship. When a dancer, while performing, reaches the highest aesthetic level she experiences *svargaloka*, but if she goes still higher, she reaches *maharaloka*. In conformity with the rules of Sanskrit grammar, the people of *mahara* are called *maahara*, the feminine gender of which is *maahari*. This, in spoken Oriya, became *maahaari*.

Originally, the institution of *devadaasi* was undoubtedly *Tantrik*. The Jagannatha cult is a unique synthesis of several, often divergent, religious precepts. From the twelfth century, when Jayadeva wrote the famous *Geetagoṇḍa*, the *Vaishnava* aspect of the cult began to predominate, but even today

elements of *Tantrik* ritual are very much in evidence in the worship of Lord Jagannatha. The much misunderstood *pancha-makaara poojaa* of *Tantra* is followed in Jagannatha worship, although in a hypostatized form. The five *ma-kaara-s* in Jagannatha worship, although in a hypostatized form. The five *ma-kaara-s* are: *madya* (wine), *matsya* (fish), *maamsa* (meat), *mudraa* (money) and *maithuna* (sex). In the worship of Jagannatha they are all hypostatized in the following manner:

(i) Water of a green coconut kept in a vessel made of bell-metal represents *madya* (wine); (ii) Vegetables cooked with asafoetida represent *matsya* (fish); (iii) Thinly-chopped ginger represents *maamsa* (meat); (iv) A variety of roasted beans represent *mudraa* (money); and (v) The dance of the *devadaasi-s* represents *maithuna* (sex).

There are a few inscriptions to prove that the tradition of *devadaasi-s* dancing in the temples of Orissa was prevalent before the eleventh century. Later, elements of Vaishnavism dominated the Jagannatha cult. It may be surmised that *devadaasi-s* attached to the Jagannatha temple at Puri were named *maahaari* after the fifteenth century, since the inscription on the *Jayavijaya-dvaara* of the temple (dated 8th July 1500 A.D.), refers to four different groups of *devadaasi-s* employed under the temple service. They are: (i) *Purunaa sampradaaya* (the ancient group); (ii) *Badathaakuranka sampradaaya* (the group attached to Balabhadra); (iii) *Kapileshwara sampradaaya* (the group belonging to Kapileshwara) and (iv) *Tailangi sampradaaya* (the group of the Telenga region).

In this inscription, the consecrated dancers are neither referred to as *devadaasi* nor as *maahaari*, but as *bandhaa naachuni* which literally means 'bonded dancer' and, connotes 'formally and permanently engaged dancer'. In the sixteenth century, during the rule of Prataparudra Deva, who was a devout Vaishnava, the Jagannatha cult came to be considerably influenced by Vaishnavism. It may be surmised that from this period the *devadaasi-s* of the temple were known as *maahaari-s*. This also explains why the term *maahaari* was not used in *Abhinayachandrikaa* written in the fifteenth century.

Although the treatise does not mention either *maahaari* or *devadaasi*, it refers on several occasions to and describes *batu-nritya* which, if properly analysed, will undoubtedly point to the dance of the *maahaari-s*. Before the references are analysed let us examine what exactly *batu-nritya* means.

In Eastern India, especially in Orissa and Bengal, the Sanskrit letter *va* is pronounced as *ba*. Therefore, the Sanskrit, word *vat* becomes *batu* in Oriya. *Vatu* is derived from the root *vat* which, in Sanskrit, is declined in two ways. Under the first (*bhvaadi*) class of verbs and the tenth (*churaadi*) class of verbs, it generally means 'to surround' or 'to tie'. In the former sense, *vat* is compounded with *kusha* (a kind of grass) to form *kushavatu* which is a ring made of *kusha* grass worn on the ring-finger during the performance of some religious rites. In the latter sense, (i.e. to tie) *vat* generally means a Brahmin male of adolescent age (spanning the period from his sacred-thread ceremony to his marriage). This is because during this period he is 'tied' to the *brahma-charya-vrata* (the vow of celibacy). The most elaborate and authentic Oriya lexicon is *Purnachandra Oriya Bhaashaakosha*. On page 5307 of this lexicon, under the word *batu*, the compiler has indicated that in colloquial Oriya it is known as *badu*. And on page 5315 of the same work, under *badu* are listed the following

three different meanings:

1. The *brahmachaari* after the sacred-thread ceremony;
2. A *shudra* servant of the gardener type engaged in the temple-service of Lord Lingaraj at Bhubaneswara;
3. An attendant, a servant.

In fact, a servant who is bound to do a particular kind of work daily or at regular intervals is called *badu*. Many *sevaka-s* (temple servants), attached to the Jagannatha temple at Puri, who do a particular kind of *sevaa* (temple service), have been designated by compounding *badu* with the kind of service that each is bound to do regularly during the various kinds of ritual worship of Lord Jagannatha. They are designated as: *paatri-badu*, *suaara-badu*, *vimaana-badu*, *khatuaa-badu*, *tolaa-badu*, *garaa-badu*, etc. In the Sanskritised version, the *badu* becomes *batu*. For instance: *paatri-badu* becomes *paatri-batu* and so on. In Sanskrit, an adolescent male began to be known as *vat* at a later period and thus the word drifted a little away from the etymological meaning. The young *brahmachaari*, however, is now also called *vat* in Sanskrit. From the above analysis it is clear that *vat*, which in Oriya is pronounced as *batu* and in colloquial Oriya as *badu*, primarily means 'bound to a particular kind of service' and in this sense *batu-nritya* is a kind of ritual dance performed regularly in the Jagannatha temple at Puri. This surmise is corroborated by the inscription on the *Jayavijaya-dvaara* where the consecrated danseuses are designated as *bandhaa naachuni*.

The manner in which *Abhinayachandrikaa* refers to *batu-nritya* strongly supports the view. First of all, contrary to general belief that *batu-nritya* is *nritya*, namely pure dance having no expressional elements, *Abhinayachandrikaa* in the forty-first *shloka* of the *Bhaavakhanda* says:

विभ्रमं वदन्त्येन विरह भावपेक्षणी ।
हताशाकामक्रान्ता या नटीविभ्रम मानसा ॥

The treatise is full of grammatical mistakes which suggests that the author Maheshwara Mahapatra, perhaps basically a dance guru, was not too well-versed in the rules of Sanskrit grammar. The above quotation, however, roughly means: "The danseuse who wants to delineate expressional the perturbed mind of a passionate woman, disappointed due to the separation from her lover, can do so through *batu-nritya*." The first line of the tenth *shloka* of the same *khanda* further establishes the fact that *batu-nritya* has also a certain expressional aspect. The line reads:

वदन्त्योत्तमे लास्ये केवलं भाव मुख्यतः ।

("Batu-nritya, at its best, is marked by lyrical dance movements in which expressional miming claims dominance.")

The following quotation from the same treatise clearly indicates the order of performance of *batu-nritya* in a dance recital.

पल्लवी गीत प्रान्ते च वदु नृत्यार्थी काव्येत् ।
द्विविधं पल्लवी मुख्य भावस्वरानुसारतः ॥

("There are two kinds of *pallavi*: the *svara-pallavi* and the *bhava-pallavi*. The dancer should perform *batu* at the end of the song accompanying the *pallavi*.")

That the *batu-nritya* had also pure dance aspects is evident from the following quotation from the same treatise:

वदुनृत्ये नहि वाद्यं नहि काव्य विनोदम् ।
केवलं तानयुक्तेन स्वरताल्लादि मुख्यतः ॥

("In the *batu-nritya* emphasis is neither on the percussive music nor on poetic line. It is mainly performed accompanied by *taana*-s.")

This does not contradict the previous quotations, although it may appear to do so. *Batu-nritya* which was being danced by the *bandha-naachuni*-s (i.e. the *maahaari*-s) had in its repertoire both pure dance (*nritya*) and expressional dance (*nritya*) numbers. Since it was ritual dancing, it differed, more in content and spirit than in style from the performance at the royal court by dancers of professional calibre, and had a repertoire comprising of both pure dance and expressional numbers.

Now the Odissi dancers present *batu* just after the invocatory *mangalaa-charana*. What they dance now used to be called *thaayinaata* (the colloquialised version of *sthaayi-nritya*), till the later part of the fifties. Even today in some parts of rural Orissa it is called *thaayinaata*. One of the eminent and living Odissi gurus, Debaprasad Das, does not call this number *batu*, but prefers to call it *sthaayi-nritya*. There is also no convincing evidence to prove that this number which is now called *batu* is in any way related to *batuka-bhairava*. Nor has the *batuka* aspect of *bhairava* ever had any direct association with the Jagannatha cult which undoubtedly inspired the evolution of the Odissi dance form.

A deeper analysis of *Abhinayachandrika* and of the Jagannatha cult will doubtless prove that the ancient ritual dancing inside the temple by consecrated dancers used to be called as *batu-nritya*.

Bengal's Changing Cultural Scenario

Swapan Mullick

Fluctuations on the Bengali cultural scene can be bewildering. Tollygunge seemed irretrievably doomed even in the last years of Uttam Kumar. But one smash hit caused a freak revival and Calcutta's little Tollywood is now roaring with activity. As were the theatre groups—but fifteen years ago. Today, they look back on their glorious past or on stalwarts who have either left the scene or have lost their old charisma. The *jatra*—the open-air opera—has, on the other hand, turned into a thriving industry and drawn away talent from films and theatre. There was a time when the recording companies flourished. Now Bengali music, both as an art and industry, has fallen on hard times.

The total picture is more confusing than is good for the cultural scene which once prided itself on its vitality. The confusion promises to persist as long as some crucial questions remain unanswered. How are good films to be made now that the State Government has withdrawn from direct production of feature films? (Its experiment proved too expensive; it yielded awards but fetched few other satisfying results). Why have theatre groups failed singularly in offering original plays or even pleasing audiences with their new productions? Is the two-way traffic between films and theatre a means of cross-fertilisation or simply a very practical method of individual survival? Why has fresh musical talent failed to appear on the horizon now that the ageing stars of the disc are beginning to look—and sound—a tired lot?

The answers are not easy to find partly because public taste seems so difficult to assess. The record companies, for instance, flourished at one time on the strength of 'surprise' offers on special occasions like the Bengali New Year or Durga Puja. This was a mixed offering consisting of classical presentations, Tagore music, recitations from Tagore, Nazrul and Jibanananda, modern musical compositions and humorous skits. Today, the best exponents of *adhunik*, including Hemanta Mukherjee, who had gripped middle-class consciousness for more than twenty-five years, find that their appeal is on the wane. The big debate is now centered on why lyric writers have been producing sub-standard work, why composers have failed to evoke a simple and refreshing response and whether established poets should now step in to rescue Bengali *adhunik* from this barren state.

The record companies still come with their Puja and New Year offerings. But there are few surprises left. They play around with the old voices, mainly by creating albums of old songs, either modern or from Tagore, Nazrul and D. L. Roy. In *Rabindrasangeet*, the late Debabrata Biswas along with veterans Suchitra Mitra, Kanika Banerjee and Subinoy Roy continue to satisfy those with real interest in the craft. Listeners with simpler tastes lap up with great delight every album of Hemanta Mukherjee's poignant resonance.

The same clear division between craft and sentiment has marked the growth of the Bengali theatre. The dividing line did not matter as long as the two different forms of drama enjoyed their respective influences. The audience was huge both for the commercial productions staged at century-old houses like the Star, Biswaroopa and Rangmahal and for the thirty to forty groups seeking dates

in auditoriums like the Rabindra Sadan, Sisir Mancha, Kala Mandir, Academy of Fine Arts and Mukta Angan. There was no real conflict except when vocal members of the group theatre considered it a social obligation to denounce the "degrading influence" and some of the alleged obscenities of the commercial theatre.

The tensions, however, were minor. The groups, for the most part, were busy putting together their new works. Bohurupee, Nandikar, Chetana, Theatre Workshop and others were as big a draw on one circuit (with names like Sombhu Mitra, Rudraprasad Sengupta and the late Ajitesh Banerjee and Keya Chakravorty) as Sabitri Chatterjee, Anup Kumar, the late Bhanu Banerjee, Supriya Devi and Mahendra Gupta were on the other. Public debates on alleged obscenities in plays like *Barbodhu* fizzled out. There were crowds, curious crowds—waiting to be fed with forbidden pleasures like the cabaret which soon became the staple diet intended to boost box office receipts. But there was also good, old-fashioned entertainment relying on slick presentation of conventional sentiment.

The groups put all their energies into adaptations of Brecht and other sources. Till the mid-seventies, they thrilled the growing number of young enthusiasts with exciting experiments. Bohurupee preserved its reputation even after the shock departure of Sombhu Mitra and later of his wife Tripti Mitra. Nandikar offered some of the finest adaptations of Brecht in plays like *Ek Poyshar Pala* under the inspiring leadership of Ajitesh Banerjee and Rudraprasad Sengupta. Utpal Dutt's devastating political statements in plays like *Tiner Talwar* and *Ebar Rajar Pala* made People's Little Theatre one of the most respected groups in the State. Then came the more recent units like Chetana whose *Jagannath* sent fresh waves across the theatre world with its brilliant inter-weaving of the images of film and theatre and a memorable performance by its director, Arun Mukherjee.

But all that is now a thing of the past. The Bengali group theatre, for reasons which can hardly be convincingly explained, has run into one of its bleakest phases. Nothing could provide grimmer evidence of this than the fact that most groups have failed to score with their new productions. The only plays which have won reasonable success are Bohurupee's *Aguner Pakhi*, *Ajker Shahjehan* presented by People's Little Theatre and the solo performance by Saonli Mitra (the talented daughter of Sombhu and Tripti Mitra) in *Nathboti Anathboti*.

So barren has the theatre scene become that when Nandikar organised a week-long National Theatre Festival in June, most groups offered their old productions. Even these were a sell-out—which only goes to prove that, whatever the reason, the present plight of the group theatre does not stem from any ebb in public enthusiasm (which was equally strong even in the case of plays from Bangladesh and from States like Rajasthan and Manipur).

Fresh talent continues to emerge in groups like Tritirtha whose *Debangshi* opened the National Festival. And, of course, the West Bengal Government does its duty through the instituting of awards and grants. But this is small comfort in the face of today's depressing reality—auditoriums are now comparatively easy to book and, except in rare cases, the balcony of the Academy of Fine Arts remains closed. More disheartening is the impression among serious theatregoers that Theatre Workshop's *Chak Bhanga Modhu* (1971) and *Jagannath* (1977) were the only two plays in the last fifteen years which rose to great heights.

The slump may be due largely to the fact that the biggest sources of inspiration are drying up. The last big occasion when Sombhu Mitra was seen on the stage (an occasion that immediately prompted night-long vigils for tickets) was *Galileo*. This was a production which also witnessed the unique phenomenon of six major groups coming together. But the experiment did not last although Sombhu Mitra was widely acknowledged to have given one of the best performances of his career. Since then he has gone into virtual retirement. One also hears little of Tripti Mitra except that she has founded a theatre school and staged *Raktakarabi* after a brief stint in the commercial theatre and a more adventurous effort to stage Mahasweta Devi's widely read novel *Hazar Churashir Maa*.

Most of the bigger groups are breaking up. All this has taken a heavy toll. But if the Bengali theatre still has excellent chances of rising, Phoenix-like, from the ashes, it is mainly because the Bengali middle-class, constituting a huge segment absolutely loves going to and talking about plays.



Sombhu Mitra in *Galileo*
(Photo. Nema Ghosh)

Theatre audiences become a veritable multitude for a *jatra* performance in a rural setting. Five decades ago, it was part of a bit of local *tamasha* and sport for the babus. Today the *jatra* is an industry with an annual turnover estimated at a mind-boggling Rs. 50 crores. Princely patronage has been replaced by a well-oiled machine. Lights, music and props have become the focal points of a technological revolution. Men who sang and roared their lines for sheer pleasure are now marketable commodities engaged in a fierce contest of groups, money power and individual ratings.

The old mythological sources, still capable of captivating an audience of 10,000 under a tarpaulin on the sprawling grass, have given way to more progressive themes. These include historicals with contemporary relevance (the reformist ideas of Rammohun Roy and Michael Madhusudhan Dutt, for instance), soul-stirring biographicals (a special interest of the veteran Shantigopal who has brought Hitler, Napoleon, Spartacus, Lenin, Prometheus and Vivekananda to the common man), plain gimmicks and "modern" adaptations ranging from the exploits of a "dacoit queen" to a sympathetic portrait of the misadventures of Billa and Ranga. For all its new features, the *jatra* is not considered a means of urban enlightenment in the same measure as the group theatre or the "new cinema" and there are many who also regard the new gimmicks as detrimental to its roots. Nevertheless the climate of changing values is adequately reflected in the work of the more eminent film and theatre personalities—among them Utpal Dutt, Ajitesh Banerjee, Tapan Sen, Bibhas Chakravorty and now Vasant Chowdhury and Supriya Devi who are engaged in the colourful blending of education and entertainment.



Shantigopal, as Hitler, in his own *Jatra* production.
(Photo: Tulu Das).



Mrinal Sen shooting Tasveer Apni Apni.
(Photo: Sital Das).

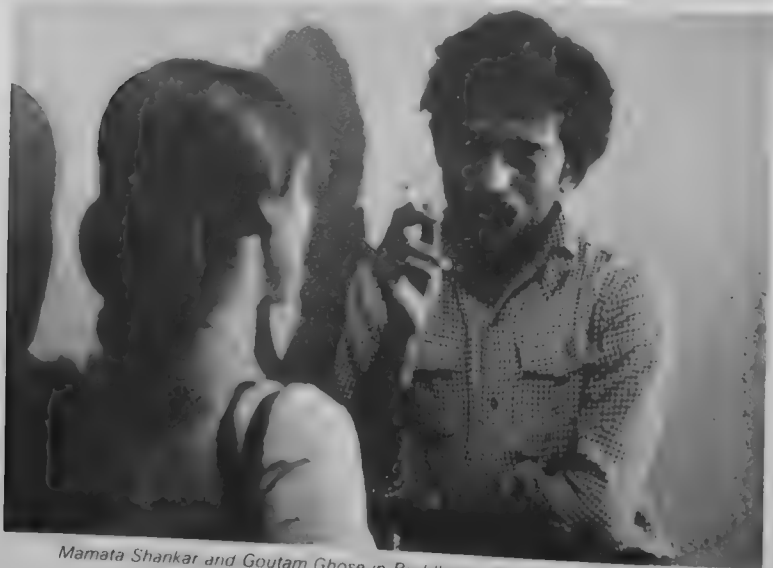
A similar effort at mixing education and entertainment at the most elementary level has spurred the revival of the Bengali cinema. An industry which was dormant and almost gasping for breath until a few years ago ironically derives most of its inspiration from the spectacular success of a film called *Shatru*, literally soaked in coarse violence and melodrama. In a way, it is a pity that film-makers from Mrinal Sen to Utpalendu Chakravorty should be making Hindi films either for the commercial screen or for television while the Bengali cinema rides high on potboilers.

Till one or two years ago, there was another side to the coin which took the Bengali cinema to the forefront of the Indian scene and eventually to the West. Now there are compelling reasons for a change. Satyajit Ray, of course, has been forced out of action for health reasons. His next involvement with celluloid will be in the television series by his son, Sandip Ray. For the series, Satyajit Ray will write the scripts and compose the music. There will be thirteen separate stories (many of them by Satyajit Ray himself) to be fitted into 23-minute slots. Work has just begun and the entire programme, sponsored by a commercial house, will be telecast, probably from January 1986, under the title *Satyajit Ray Presents*.

Television has already become a medium for Mrinal Sen and Tapan Sinha. Sen's *Tasveer Apni Apni* turned out to be disappointing—after the change in his artistic outlook, with the emphasis on sensitive depiction of the human situation in such films as *Kharij* and *Khandhar*. His next venture has been put off but it will most certainly be in Hindi and is slated to get off the ground towards the end of the year. Sinha's *Aadmi aur Aurat* won the National Award for the best film on national integration and its simple treatment, laced with just the right amount of melodrama designed not to offend the sensibilities of an enlightened audience, perhaps suited the needs of the TV audiences. Even so, Sinha, always a big draw with the audiences at home, feels more comfortable making full-length feature films. A veteran of over thirty films, he maintains modest standards of art and considers it more worthwhile to please filmgoers with what he believes to be honest entertainment.

For the younger group, more deeply committed to serious social comment, it has been an altogether different experience. For about five years, they had survived on State support. Compared with the State subsidy programme, which turned out to be counter-productive (bad or incomplete films), direct production (on budgets up to Rs. 17 lakhs for certain ventures) yielded award-winners like Utpalendu Chakravorty's *Chokh*, Buddhadeb Dasgupta's *Grihajuddha* and Goutam Ghose's *Dakhal*. It caused this talented young trio to shoot into prominence and took them with their films to the big festivals. The films included such minor works as Utpalendu Chakravorty's documentary on the *Music of Satyajit Ray* but, altogether, gave convincing proof of the fact that a younger generation would soon come of age—if it hadn't already.

But trouble soon arose over the commercial release of these films. The State



Mamata Shankar and Goutam Ghose in Buddhadeb Dasgupta's *Grihajuddha*.



From Saikat Bhattacharya's *Duba*
(Photo: Samar Das)



Smita Patil and Sadhu Meher in Utpalendu Chakravorty's *Debshishu*
(Photo: Jyotish Chakravarty)

Government had its own procedures in which the commercial distributors were not interested. Eventually, after a long and agonising wait, the Government had to depend on its own Film Development Corporation to release these films. *Chokh* brought encouraging results but there were many others which turned out to be expensive losses. The only big hope at the moment is Saroj Dey's *Kony*, which has already bagged a National Award for the best film with wholesome entertainment and aesthetic value. It is said to have successfully depicted middle-class sentiments and drawn superb performances from Soumitra Chatterjee and a new girl (Sreeparna Banerjee) in unfolding the story of the struggle of a young swimmer and the inspiration she draws from her coach.

However, in terms of expenditure from the public exchequer, the losses could hardly be explained in terms of awards and support of young talent. For all practical purposes, the direct production programme has been withdrawn. The young directors are virtually left without financial support from conventional sources. It is all to the good that a private producer in Calcutta did eventually come forward to allow Goutam Ghose to make *Paar*. It had its problems in the production and later stages. But all that has now been wiped out by its all-round triumph—the National Award for the best Hindi film, the acting awards for Shabana Azmi and Naseeruddin Shah and now, most important, its excellent performance at the box-office.

Ghose's record is perhaps the most inspiring feature of the "new cinema" in Bengal. Otherwise, there is the not altogether happy picture of Buddhadeb Dasgupta making *Andhi Gali* in Bombay (and drawing some controversy before its public release) and Utpalendu Chakravarty relying for his "stinging attacks" on the National Film



Buddhadeb Dasgupta briefing Dipti Naval for a scene in *Andhi Gali*.
(Photo: Samar Das).

Development Corporation which is producing *Debshishu*. But he continues to be Bengal's young hope when many others aspiring to belong to the rank have begun to fall by the wayside. Aparna Sen, as director, did not appear to share the aspiration for the simple reason that *36 Chowringhee Lane* and now *Paroma*, had a different sort of social objective. And Aparna, in any case, presented the curious combination of the commercial theatre, the B-grade celluloid dramas which she acted in and the refreshingly different human portraits in the films she directed.

The big question is whether the difference can be sustained in the face of the overriding demands of the commercial industry. The Government is more cautious with its support programmes and is concentrating mainly on a new Film Centre (housing, auditoriums, an archive and a film library, among other things) and a colour laboratory at Salt Lake. The time has come for the "new cinema" to survive on its own steam. The doubts have, to some extent, been cleared after *Chokh* and *Paar*. The aims of this cinema, fortunately, remain strong as ever. But there can perhaps be nothing better than the gradual success with which these aims become a vital part of the mainstream cinema.

Kavuthvams

Chitra Visweswaran

In recent years one witnesses on the performing platform the dances belonging to the ancient temple tradition of South India. *Navasandhi-s*, *pushpanjali-s* and *kavuthvam-s* form an integral part of this group. Though these pieces have been performed for a number of years within the hallowed precincts of temples, it is only recently that they have gained prominence in Bharatanatyam recitals.

Of these, the *kavuthvam* presents a fascinating scope for study, both historically and technically. As one delves deeper, the subject becomes even more intriguing.

A study of the temple tradition and extant literature sheds light on the fact that the *kavuthvam* of Tamilnadu has a parallel tradition in the *kavutham* of Andhra. The earliest mention of the term *kavuthvam* in Tamil literature dates back to the work *Kulappa Nayakkan Virali Vidu Dhuthu* by Supradeepa Kavirayar (about 1725 AD).

Aadavarai eyyum madhavēl kaikkichaiyum malar evālpōl

thaiyalāl pushpānjali cheithāl - cheithu pillaiyār

kavuthvam kondāl āda ilaya nayanār

kavuthvam konu nanninēn.

The term used here is *kavuthvam* and not any distortion of or derivation from it. The lines suggest that the dancer first struck the basic position of the feet essential for commencing the dance. Whether she chanted the *kavuthvam* in a ritualistic manner and then struck the position of the feet in order to dance or whether she first took the position to dance and then performed the *kavuthvam* is, however, not very clear. Perhaps it was a prelude to the dance proper, similar to the *Mangalacharan* in Odissi—the invocation and not the actual performance of dance.

Discussing the word *kavuthvam*, Prof. P. Sambamoorthy suggests the possibility of its being a distortion of *kavithvam* (from *kavya*, which has much to do with poetry). But the *kavuthvam-s* available to us are by no means great works of poetry. Nor can they be traced back ritualistically to *kavithva* and *kavya*. In his introduction to Jaya Senapathi's *Nritta Ratnavali*, Dr. V. Raghavan traces the present day *shabdam* to *kavithvam*, which appears to be a more plausible explanation.

On the other hand, while studying the term *kavuthvam* from the ritualistic point of view, it is possible to associate it with temple rituals. The main deity in any temple is called the *moolavar* or *moola bimbam*; the deity taken out in temple processions is known as the *utsavar*, *utsava bimbam* or *kautuka bimbam*. It is known that *kavuthvam-s* were performed in the temple processions in the presence of the *kautuka bimbam*. Could the origin of the name of this dance piece be traced to this ritual? It is significant that the ceremony of tying the *kappu* around

the wrists of young couples during the marriage ceremony is called *kautuka bandam*. It is also interesting to note that *kauthukamu* in Telugu literally means *kapu utsava* or the celebration of tying the *kapu* (see *Suryaraya Andhra Nighantu—Sangeetha Sabdha Chandrika*, a dictionary of musical terms in Telugu). It is thus possible that the *kavuthvam* or *kavutham* was performed in the presence of the deity, in the nature of the tying of a *kappu* to ward off evil.

My observation on the close bond between *kavuthvam* and *kappu* is further strengthened by the study of old pieces such as *Bhairavakappu* in *Takkayaga parani* by the famous Tamil poet, Ottakuttan, who belongs to the twelfth century A.D.

BHAIRAVAKĀPPU

Uraka kankanath tharuvana panamani

ulakatangalum thuyil ezha veyil ezha

udai thavirthathan thiruvurai udai mani

ulavi onrōdonru alamara vilakiya

karathalam tharun thamaruka chathipothi

kazhal punaindha chempapiripura oliyodu

kalakalan kalan kalanena varum oru

kariya kanjukan kazhalinaik karudhuvām.

Many literary and poetic pieces begin with such *kappu-s*. The *Bhairavakappu* has many characteristics found in *kavuthvam-s* as available to us today. This clearly leads to a discussion of the essential characteristic features of this dance piece that is today performed in the name of *kavuthvam*.

Perhaps, the most comprehensive definition of *kavuthvam*, is in *Natyacharya Vedantam Parvatheesam's Kuchipudi Nritya Darpana* in Sanskrit:

Patāksharēna samyuktham devatā vishayātmakam

Nānartha' chitrasamyuktham kiththāntham kautham uchyathē.

(That which has a combination of syllables pertaining to footwork (*sollukattu*), that which pertains to the deeds of gods and thus presents pictures of various types and ends with the rhythmic syllable, *kiththa*, is called a *kavuthvam*.) Whether it is done in the Bharatanatyam or the Kuchipudi styles, the concept and the structure are the same.

The most important characteristic feature peculiar only to *kavuthvam-s* is the close intertwining of lyric (*sahitya*) and *sollukattu* (rhythmic syllables), which is non-existent in any other dance number.

In some *kavuthvam*-s, the juxtaposition of lyrics and *sollukattu* is close indeed. As an example, one can take a look at the *Rudra Vinayakar Kavuthvam*. The line goes *thakkita udara gadan*. Here, *thakkita* is *sollukattu* and *udara gadan* is *sahitya*. Similarly, in the line *thadhikka thudhikka yanaimuhathavar*, *thadhikka* is *sollukattu* and *thudhikka* is *sahitya*.

Yet another example can be cited from the *Tiruvalangadu Kali Kavuthvam*:—

thōthōgu thōgīdā thollayālankādu

thōlāda kāliyudan thakanōku dhikanōku.

Here, *thothogu thogida* and *thakanoku dhikanoku* are rhythmic syllables, whereas the remainder comprises lyrics.

In the *Chokkar Kavuthvam*, one stanza of *sahitya* alternates with one stanza of *sollukattu*. This is reminiscent of the intertwining of these two aspects as found in the *Bhairavakappu*.

According to the definition of *kavuthvam* given by Vedantam Parvatheesam, all *kavuthvam*-s concern God. They contain *devathavishaya* or matters pertaining to and qualities associated with a particular god or goddess. Every *kavuthvam* appears to be in praise of the deity of the temple to which it is dedicated. In the form of a panegyric of praise, *kavuthvam* does not contain the slightest hint of a prayer for benediction. Words such as *pahimam* or *rakshamam* (i.e. protect me) do not appear, perhaps because the *kavuthvam* was intended to be performed as a *kappu* to ward off evil and not to invoke the blessings of the deity.

Vedantam Parvatheesam further states in his definition that *kavuthvam*-s end with *kitha* (*kithantham kautamuchyathe*). All the *kavuthvam*-s of the Tamil tradition available to us in *Natanadi Vadhya Ranjakam* by Gangamuthu Nattuvanar, end with *dhi kiththa*, the same is the case in the Telugu tradition. For example, the *Srisailem Mallikarjuna Kavutham* concludes with the same *sollu*.

These characteristic features mentioned in Parvatheesam's definition are found in both the Tamil and the Telugu traditions. That these two traditions run parallel cannot be refuted, for the Telugu influence during the Nayak period in the Tanjore Court, and, to a certain extent, the Sankritic influence, cannot be minimised. There must have been a close interchange of ideas between Andhradesha and Tamilnadu during the Nayak times. In the Nayak period, one cannot overlook *Korvyache Sahityache Jinnas* (dance pieces in Marathi with Tamil transliteration and translation) written by Shri Serfoji Maharaja. Many of the *nirupana*-s in this book have a *kavuthvam* at the beginning though the term used is not the Tamil *kavuthvam* but the Telugu *kavutham* (examples are to be found in *Umamaheshwara parinayam*, *Kumara Sambhava nirupanam* and *Kiratarjuniya nirupanam* to mention a few).

Besides the characteristics delineated by Vedantam Parvatheesam, there are other salient aspects to be perceived in most *kavuthvam*-s. It is interesting to note that when one studies the *kavuthvam*-s the *sollukattu* reflects the character of the particular deity that it is ascribed to. Dancers respond to this sound, for it is this that gives them inspiration. The sound reflects the character of the deity. Not all *kavuthvam*-s have been taught to us traditionally nor have many been used in

recent years. So when one makes an attempt to revive them, the softness or vigour of the *sollu* could aid in choreography. For instance, the *Tiruchengodu Vishnu Kavuthvam* begins thus; *Ta Dhi Thom Nam Endroru Talam*. The sound is soft. There is nothing harsh about it. It reflects the character of that particular deity, Vishnu. In this *kavuthvam* we find that there is mention of only six *avatara*-s or incarnations of Vishnu. Incidentally, the four incarnations omitted are all the aggressive ones—Narasimha, Parashurama, Balarama and Kalki.

In the *Kali Kavuthvam*, the *sollukattu* reflects dynamic energy.

Thath dheem thaka dheem thath dheem thath dheem

thakkinōm tharikitā thagirthakita dheem dheem

dhikkinom tharikita thagirthakita thom thom

thagirthakita dheem dheem thagirthakita thom thom

thagirthakita digirthakita thongirthakita nangirthakita.

Let us turn to the content of *kavuthvam*-s. *Sanchari bhava*-s or elaboration of ideas are not presented in *kavuthvam*-s for the original purpose of this item would then be lost. In many of them, however, the lyrics alone have a wealth of mythological, religious and social connotations. The third stanza of *Chokkar Kavuthvam* reads thus:

Valayal vitroru gnānasambandar edade edir ērave

neerillāđavar veeru pēshiya nipuna chamanarai kazhuvil ētriya

neethi nāyakanām.

The words *kazhuvil etriya* give one an idea of the social order of the period of Thirugnanasambandar when religious fanaticism reigned supreme. Non-believers were subject to capital punishment—this was not peculiar to our country alone for the *kazhuvil etral* of this period in India finds an exact parallel in the 'impaling' of heretics by religious fanatics in Europe.

The *Sthalapurana* (or the story revolving around the deity and temple to which they are dedicated), finds mention in some of the *kavuthvam*-s. For instance, in *Chokkar Kavuthvam* the story of Chokkanathar or Sundareswarar as Shiva wedded to Meenakshi in Madurai, where the Lord dances with His right foot uplifted to please His royal devotees, Rajasekhara Pandya, is suggested in a few words.

While recreating these *kavuthvam*-s, a study of the footnotes (where available), would help in choreographing the piece. *Vinayakar Kavuthvam* (so often presented on the stage), carries a footnote specifically stating that it is the *Rudra Vinayaka Kavuthvam*. This suggests where the emphasis should lie in choreography to make presentation more meaningful.

The Telugu tradition, according to Nataraja Ramakrishna, reveals the existence of a number of *kavuthvam*-s such as *Lakshmi Kavutham*, *Vishnu*

Kavutham, Shiva Kavutham, etc. It is significant that each *kavutham* has its corresponding *tala* (rhythmic metre). *Lakshmi Kavutham* was performed in *Lakshmi tala*, *Shiva Kavutham* in *Rudra tala*, *Vinayaka Kavutham* in *Vinayaka tala*, *Vishnu Kavutham* in *Vishnu Krantha Vrittam* and that all of them have been composed in *samagathi* or even metre.

In the Telugu tradition, one of the interpretations of the word *kavutham* is interesting. It is said to be an acrostic formed by the three syllables—*ka*, *vu* and *tham*—*ka* for the presiding deity, Saraswati, with white colour symbolising the *satva guna*; *vu* for the presiding deity, Mahalakshmi, with red colour symbolising the *rajas guna*; *tham* for the presiding deity, Parvati, with black colour symbolising the *tamas guna*.

There is, indeed, a great scope for the presentation of *kavutham*-s through the idiom of dance. Those performed on stage are but a small number compared to the rich variety that is available. Dancers and gurus would do well to look into the possibility of enriching the repertoire of Bharatanatyam recitals with *kavutham*-s.

News & Notes

Theatre Workshop: "Body-Voice and Space—Non-verbal Expression in Theatre", Bombay, April 15—May 15, 1985.

Wolfram Mehring, Director of Le Theatre de la Mandragore, Paris, recently conducted a four-week Theatre Workshop for actors in Bombay. The Workshop was sponsored by the National Centre for the Performing Arts and Max Mueller Bhavan.

The response from actors was very positive and because of the large number of participants (forty-two in all), it was decided to split the Workshop into two sessions of three hours' duration—one in the morning and the other in the evening. That the students found the work rewarding can be seen from the fact that, after the first two days, there were very few dropouts. It is clear that the need for training is keenly felt among actors in this city, most of whom are self-taught and work by intuition and perhaps imitation, which, in the absence of good models, compounds their difficulties.

Workshops, covering all aspects of theatre, could certainly fulfil an important purpose, specially if they are intensive, short-term, carefully planned and publicised well in advance, so that many more persons can manage to attend. Workshops can be particularly valuable in trying out new ideas; some of these could be planned to impart training in a particular style, followed by a major production.

In Wolfram Mehring's Workshop, there was not much room for discussion. It followed the oriental pattern of guru demonstrating and the student following suit but the notion behind this method is that, in imitating, the student absorbs the theory. The technique works very well at that level. The visible evidence was the day-by-day improvement in the actors' control over their bodies and in the expressive and co-ordinated way in which they worked in the production staged at the Tata Theatre on May 17, as a culmination of the Workshop.

The Workshop consisted of exercises and improvisations. Actors learnt to find rootedness to the ground and then to strive forward, the two movements working as opposing forces. The exercises embodied the law central to all the arts, the dualism of opposites: the 'yes' and the 'no', the forward thrust against the pull of inertia—what the Chinese term the 'yin-yang' and Mehring calls 'exceptions and the rule'.

Whereas the exercises were meant to be imitated, the improvisations came out of suggestions from the actors based on the theme 'Exceptions and the Rule'. These ideas were subtly re-worked by Mehring in accordance with his theoretical assumptions and, following minutely-perceived aesthetic notions, they evolved to the point where a full-fledged production was presented to the public.

From the Workshop and production, one can derive Mehring's credo:

Intellectual drama, which stays in the domain of ideas and speech, tends to make the actor merely a mouthpiece of the author. True theatre is the actor's arena, and it is with his body and mind that ideas, emotions and dramatic conflict should be



Mehring (right) demonstrating an exercise during the Workshop.

projected. Non-verbal theatre is not to be confused with mime. Mime does not meet these requirements because it is used to tell a story, and that might as well be told in words. It is not that Mehring is against the use of words but he believes that they must not take over. There is a whole range of plastic movements that the body is capable of expressing and basic emotions like suffering, love, hate and fear, can be transmitted directly and non-verbally to the spectator. Human sounds like a hiss, murmur, or shout, are all part of the actor's repertoire and can be used with telling effect. Music, lighting and sound effects are useful, but they should not displace the centrality which the actor must have on stage. Technology, which pervades every part of our lives must, at least in the theatre, be kept subservient to the actor's presence.

One should not get the impression from all this that Mehring is against traditional plays. His favourite playwrights are Sophocles, Plautus, Shakespeare, Lorca and Buchner. Clearly, he had reacted against what he saw as an arid intellectuality present in today's theatre. His longing for a new kind of theatre, based on body and voice, which could transcend national barriers and make sense to people of varied cultures, led him to experiment in a different direction.

Mehring is influenced by Japanese folk drama and *Noh*, and Eastern martial dances, but he does not advocate the use of formal movements which are of necessity locked in long-standing traditions and ancient cultures. Rather, he believes that actors should derive their inspiration from observations in real life. In his view, human beings (despite differences in culture and race) react to basic emotions in the same kind of way. It is on these intrinsically human reactions that the actors must draw.

There is food for thought in all this—one among the many useful outcome of any workshop. It would be very interesting to have Mehring conduct a more extensive workshop in Bombay and perhaps present a play as its culmination. It would certainly be something to look forward to. It is not often that a person of his capabilities is invited to our country, and equally rare to find someone willing to put in this kind of strenuous and demanding work in Bombay's enervating summer months.

—TONI PATEL

Book Reviews

THE MAHABHARATA: A LITERARY STUDY by Krishna Chaitanya. Clarion Books, New Delhi, 1985, Rs. 175.00 (*In English*).

The *Mahabharata* is an unique composition, not only in terms of its length (three-and-a-half times the Bible and longer than all the epic poems in the European languages put together) but also in terms of the humanistic significance of characters and episodes. Many scholars have studied this epic as a poem, as a didactic work, as a philosophical treatise, as a political handbook etc. The present author, Krishna Chaitanya, reads this epic as a total poem, as one aesthetic creation, as a poetic perception more profound than a philosophical treatise and offering a more inclusive and just reading of the world and men. The prime metaphor of the poem is never lost in spite of the encyclopaedic growth of the epic over centuries. The author analyses the psyche of the important dramatis personae, shaping and shaped by action. To illustrate, Dhritarashtra faces culpability as he lives in self-deception nourished by a wrong self-image: maturity dawns only when he is dying. The limitations of Bhishma could not outgrow the circumstances he faced; hence his tragic destiny which fails to prevent war but brings a radical transformation in the victors. The author deeply examines episodes like the dice-game and highlights poignant questions raised by the troubled human soul: If right action brings good, and wrong deeds lead to bitter results, is not man's destiny trapped within the iron framework of a mechanical law?

The most significant contribution of the author is his brilliantly-penetrating assessment (covering about 380 pages) of the Gita, 'the great donation from Vyasa, a sensuously palpable poem and not an intellectually analysed reportage or treatise'. The Kurukshetra war teaches that history is fatefully open-ended. With the gift of freedom which man enjoys both progress and regress are possible. One has to know and believe that man and God are interdependent like the vine and its branches. History is neither uncontrolled nor unexpected; it is the programme and fulfilment of the deity. God may lay out a programme but it is man who is in the forefront in history. And man has to go beyond the force of instincts by a conscious choice of values, which would bring the expansion and fulfilment of the self.

This ever-pulsating epic, with its philosophy, has remained a touching poem. The metaphysical import of the poem does not mar the brilliant images or the sustained momentum of the narration. Vyasa was both a poet and a pundit; hence the aesthetic reading of reality is more comprehensive and satisfying than a purely metaphysical interpretation. The epic, thus, transforms our totality by inspiring us to become a partner of the deity "in unrelenting work for the weal of the world and in serene relish of it as an aesthetic creation" (p. 450).

Krishna Chaitanya's literary study of the *Mahabharata* is refreshing and revealing; it instils gratitude to both Vyasa and Krishna.

—S. A. UPADHYAYA

RAGA—SARITA by C. R. Vyas. Published by Satish C. Vyas, 3/4 Bhuta Nivas, Matunga, Bombay 400 019, 1984, Rs. 25.00 (*In Hindi*).

SWARAMAYEE by Prabha Atre. Published by Chetashree Prakashan, Amalner, 1984, Rs. 40.00 (*In Marathi*).

RAGA—SARITA comprises a collection of 121 *bandish*-es composed by the author. He has also set 107 of these compositions to traditional Hindustani *raga*-s, while the remaining 14 are cast in five melodies created by him. With the exception of one piece, which is a *tarana*, the *bandish*-es are all *khayal*-s rendered in slow (*vilambit*), medium (*madhya*) or fast (*drut*) tempi in a variety of familiar *tala*-s and with full musical notation in each case. Thus, in the main, the book appears to be in the nature of a textbook for use in scholastic education. It should also prove useful, in a wider sense, to performers interested in enlarging their repertoire.

RAGA—SARITA was published on the occasion of its author's 60th birthday in November 1984. C. R. Vyas, who has risen to prominence as a leading Hindustani vocalist, scholar and composer in recent years, is not a 'professional' in the conventional sense. Music to him has been a serious pursuit since his school days and the stresses and strains of doing a regular job did not deflect him to the slightest degree from his endeavour in a field as demanding as classical music. It is just as well that he chose to retire from service prematurely to devote himself completely to his art.

After his early grooming from Govindrao Bhatambrekar, an exponent of the Kirana *gharana*, Vyas benefited immensely from the guidance of Rajarambuva Paradkar and his distinguished *guru*, Yeshwantbuva Mirashi, the noted veteran of the Gwalior *gayaki*. Still later, he was associated with the eminent scholar-musician, S. N. Ratanjankar, and his noted disciples. And finally, he came under the influence of Jagannathbuva Purohit "Gunidas", the versatile scholar-musician and composer of the Agra *gharana*. The influence of these mentors is evident as much in his contribution as a composer as in his roles as performer and teacher.

It is a little difficult to attempt a summation of a book of this kind. Apart from the obvious fact that literary or rather 'composing' virtues claim due attention in the general scheme of evaluation, it would be equally true to say that the purpose or validity of such an endeavour must, in the final analysis, lie in its practical application. Be it a traditional or self-composed *raga* or *bandish*, its popular acceptance and eventual assimilation into the mainstream of the classical tradition must depend not so much on its novelty or structural authenticity as on its sustaining power and its potential as entertainment. And the performing platform is the only testing ground for all musical creations. It would, therefore, be unfair and even pretentious to attempt an assessment of the practical value of these compositions on the basis of their "cold-print" presentation. Besides the author's *Shiv-Abhogi* and *Dhanakoni-Kalyan*, this reviewer has had no occasion to hear the *raga*-s and *bandish*-es incorporated in the book. And these two have only served to evoke a mixed reaction.

Even so, the book does seek to break new ground in many ways, as has been pointed out by the noted scholar-musician, K. G. Ginde, in his foreword. For instance, the *asthayi* and *antara* sections of individual *khayal*-s are more brief and set within the framework of a single *avartan*. The tempo employed for *vilambit* compositions is, in most cases, actually *madhya* in its pace, unlike in the traditional *bandish*-es. The manner of coming to the *sam* also marks a novel departure from established practice. According to Ginde, the author has kept in view the changing trends and needs of the contemporary musical scene.

Call it a coincidence or what you will—this superbly produced book bears a striking resemblance to the commemoration volume published, a few months earlier, on the occasion of the 60th birthday of Kumar Gandharva. I have in mind *not* the photographic part of that volume, but the second part, which contains a portfolio of handwritten *bandish*-es. Also, like the Kumar Gandharva volume, the book under review is printed by offset on cream-coloured paper and the layout is more or less identical. Produced and published through the courtesy of the Indian Classical Music Foundation, the book under review is quite modestly priced so that it is within the reach of teachers and students.

Prabha Atre's SWARAMAYEE embodies a collection of nineteen articles and two poems, all published in various Marathi newspapers and magazines. The author, who is today one of our top-ranking vocalists of the Hindustani classical tradition, holds a bachelor's degree in science and law and a doctorate in music from the Gandharva Mahavidyalaya. She presently heads the music department of the S.N.D.T. Women's University, Bombay, and pursues writings on music as a hobby amid her academic and professional commitments.

The book can be said to fall, broadly, in three sections. In the first are sensitive profiles of four great stalwarts—Sureshbabu Mane and his illustrious sister, Mirabai Barodekar, who are Prabha Atre's mentors; Amir Khan and Bade Ghulam Ali Khan, whose influence she acknowledges, and who have also shaped her style.

A wide range of topics is covered in the second section. The thirteen articles reveal her approach to the aesthetics of *khayal*-singing, the role of *sargam* in *raga* exploration, the relationship between musicians and critics, Indian music in the Western context, a national cultural policy in relation to classical music, and other allied subjects. There is also an account of her interesting interview with Bhimsen Joshi. The author's ingenious attempt, in another article, to find affinity between law and music makes fascinating reading.

The third section carries her article on the Kirana *gharana*, an autobiographical piece and two poems.

Prabha Atre has also made her mark as an *avant garde* vocalist and has often provoked controversies in the field. Yet she is proud of the Kirana tradition, and has a deep respect for our musical heritage. At the same time, she is aware of changing times and tastes and advocates a more catholic attitude towards the problems facing Hindustani music today.

While one may or may not agree with many of her assumptions or opinions, one has to concede that she has brought her considerable knowledge and experience

to bear on her writings. One admires the finesse and incisiveness with which she expresses whatever she wishes to convey to the reader. The narration is marked by elegance and lucidity and makes extremely pleasant reading. The book, financed jointly by the Maharashtra State Board for Literature and Culture and the Revoo Pratishthan, a public trust, is well-designed. It could have been more modestly priced, though.

—MOHAN NADKARNI

Records:

BUDDHADEV DASGUPTA (Sarod). *Raga-s* Kamod, Desh, Pilu.
EMI EASD 1425 (Stereo).

GREAT MASTER GREAT MUSIC: PT. OMKARNATH THAKUR Speaks & Sings.
Side One: Lecture on *Raga* Bilawal; Side Two: *Khayal* in *Raga* Alhaiya Bilawal.
EMI 33 ECX 3303.

Naushad Presents KHUMAAR (Ghazals-Nazms).
Sung by Mohinderjit & Sandhya Rao. Composed by Mohinderjit.
CBS IND 1021 (Stereo).

TAGORE SONGS: Sung by BIJOYA CHAUDHURI.
MUSIC INDIA 2392 599 (Stereo).

Cassettes:

MALLIKARJUN MANSUR (Classical Vocal). Tabla: Narayanrao Indorkar. *Raga-s*
Jaunpuri, Jait Kalyan and Bihari.
EMI 6 TCS 04B 7165 (Stereo).

GAAN-HIRA—HIRABAI BARODEKAR & SARASWATI RANE (Classical Vocal).
Tabla: Narayanrao Indorkar.
EMI 6TC 04B 7141.

SAVITA DEVI (Semi-classical Vocal).
EMI 6TCS 01B 5252 (Stereo).

LAKSHMI SHANKAR & NIRMALA DEVI (Thumri).
EMI 6TC 04B 7185.

SANT BHAKTIDHARA (Various Artistes).
HMV TPHV 41143.

JAIRAM—JAISHYAM: PURSHOTTAM DAS JALOTA.
EMI 4TCS 04B 1349 (Stereo).

With the first few notes of *raga* Kamod on Side One, Buddhadev Dasgupta captures the essence of this nocturnal melody, and goes on to develop the *raga* in neat, logical sequences to reach the higher octave. The brief *alap* leads on to *jod* and then to the *vilambit* and *drut gat-s*. It is a satisfying recital, and the use of syncopation in weaving rhythmic phrases, during the latter half of the piece, is particularly enjoyable. On Side Two again, with the first few strokes of the plectrum, he brings out the plaintive mood of *raga* Desh. He offers here a short piece set to Jhap *tala* followed by a faster one in Teen *tala*. The concluding item in *raga* Pilu underscores the richness of Dasgupta's mature musical imagination and his mastery of the sarod.

The late Pandit Omkarnath Thakur was prone to harness a dimension of drama to his renderings and heighten their evocativeness. The Bilawal *raga* we

have here (the popular composition *Daiyan kahan*) is typical of the maestro's style. He begins (Side One) with an explanation in Hindi of the essential features of the *raga*. His comments referring to the theoretical aspects (*shadja grama*, *madhyam grama*, *murchchhana-s* and frequencies etc.) may not interest those who are not acquainted with the theory of music, but his illustrations on the use of *gamaka-s* to build up a melodic entity for a *raga* offer relief from the effects of a straight narrative. The recording is from the Archives of All India Radio.

Naushad Ali offers in the third disc a set of *ghazal-s* sung by Mohinderjit and Sandhya Rao, two of them as duets. While the number rendered by Sandhya Rao is passable, Mohinderjit's husky, soft voice makes for pleasant listening.

Bijoya Chaudhuri presents in her disc a dozen Tagore songs in a lilting, typically Bengali style. Included here are some popular favourites like *Amar Mallika Bane* and *Prabhu Amar Priyo Amar*. She sings in a sweet, silvery voice and alternates brisk numbers with plaintive ones to offer a variety of moods through the two sides of the album.

Among the cassettes, septuagenarian Mallikarjun Mansur's stands out as an impressive performance. Side A is devoted to *raga* Jaunpuri and, in characteristic fashion, he plunges straight into the *bandish* without any preamble. His steady, clear voice, the way he pinpoints notes with arresting accuracy and his amazing breath control in holding the higher octave *sa* are all noteworthy features of this offering from this doyen of the Jaipur *gharana*. The reverse side features Jait Kalyan and Bihari, two *raga-s* that are heard but infrequently. It is good that he has chosen to preserve on record such rarely-heard melodies, for the benefit of future generations. All the three items on this cassette are rendered with consummate artistry and characteristic verve.

For those who have heard Hirabai Barodekar and Saraswati Rane during their heyday, this cassette will bring nostalgic memories of their pleasant, soothing style of highlighting the melodious rather than the rhythmic in their music. The two voices blend beautifully to develop the *raga* through successive, continuous stages. Side A has *raga* Chandrakans in *vilambit* and *drut khayal-s* while Side B offers a competent presentation of the complex *raga* Basant Bahar.

A fine blending of two voices is again a feature of the cassette of *thumri-s* by Lakshmi Shankar and Nirmala Devi. The artistes team up for duets in two numbers and then each offers a *thumri* alone. The poignancy that they manage to infuse into their renderings makes for music that does not suffer in repetition.

Savita Devi, daughter of the late Siddheshwari Devi, is a competent vocalist who presents here *thumri*, *dadra*, and *kajri*. The opening Bhairavi item *Shyam Mori Gali Aaja* is perhaps the best of the six items featured here. While her melodious voice is a definite asset, she has yet to develop that full-bodied roundness in delivery which can infuse life into the lyrics and accentuate the emotive element.

Sant Bhaktidhara is a collection of devotional songs that begins and ends with *bhajan-s* by M. S. Subbulakshmi (*Hari Awan Ki Awaz* and *Hari Tum Haro* on Side A). Included here are *bhajan-s* by Paluskar (*Thumak Chalata Ramchandra*), Lakshmi Shankar (*Nath Anathan Ki Sudhi Lije* and *Mati Kahe Kumbhar*), Juthika

Roy (*Aaj Mere Ghar Preetam*) and Purshottam Das Jalota (*Chadariya Jheeni*). Two pieces sung by Pandit Jasraj in 'dhrupad-oriented' style are also included, although one gets the impression that they do not quite fit into the mood and character of the other numbers.

There is an earthy quality to Jalota's devotional music, matched with appropriately uncomplicated tunes in the cassette *Jairam Jaishyam*. His clear diction and simple style make for a wholesome musical idiom that is satisfying even to those who are looking only for something in the classical mode.

—SAKUNTALA NARASIMHAN

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by

Dr. V. Raghavan

Dr. Raghavan has made extensive studies of Muttuswami Dikshitar, the man and his music, and was one of our greatest authorities on all aspects of the composer's creations. The book contains an article of some 10,000 words on Muttuswami Dikshitar by Dr. Raghavan and contributions by him on members of the Dikshitar *shishya parampara*. The text of the famous *Navagraha kriti*s is included and presented with *swaralipi* (notation). A Dikshitar bibliography, a selective discography and a comprehensive index to the musical compositions of the entire Dikshitar tradition are other important features of the volume. Dr. Raghavan's painstaking labours have contributed towards making this book a reference manual of the highest value and an indispensable tool for students of music.

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